

Paul's letter to Philemon shows up as a reading once every three years. It always happens at the end of the summer, when we've spent weeks talking about discipleship. And it's set up against a couple of really strong texts that might have a lot more meat to them than this skinny little letter. So why preach on Philemon?

Nobody's going to notice if you don't, right? To make matters worse, the letter has been used by many, particularly in the United States, to justify slavery. The argument is that since Onesimus was a runaway slave whom Paul was returning to his rightful master, we ought to do the same. If Paul was willing to return a runaway slave to his owner, shouldn't we do the same thing? He belong to him, he's his property? If Paul wasn't willing to fight against the laws of Imperial Rome, why should American Christians disobey the laws of a democratic state?

We don't know the full truth of Paul's intentions. I hope that he was fighting for Onesimus' full release but even if that's true, it's a difficult piece of our country's past. Christians have used this Biblical text to justify the continued enslavement of our African American sisters and brothers. And it was taken for granted that the letter to Philemon sanctioned slavery, segregation and racism. It was okay to do that because Paul didn't say it was wrong.

That would be a great reason to just skip over Philemon and look for another text. A better text. But there's some good stuff in this letter, that I think we shouldn't miss.

+ + +

What you have in your bulletin is the entire letter, except for the last four verses. It was written by Paul who was in prison at the time. We're not sure where he was exactly, but a good guess would be Ephesus. And he was writing to a man named Philemon, who was a Roman citizen living in the city of Colossae. If you look for Colossae on a modern map, you will not find it. About a hundred years after this letter was written, the city was destroyed. It has now become an archaeological dig and it's about 120 miles east of Ephesus in what is now Turkey.

Based on the available information, it's likely that Paul met Philemon when he was in Ephesus at an earlier time – when the apostle wasn't in jail. Philemon heard Paul preaching and teaching and became a Christian. So when Paul's colleague Epaphrus started the church in Colossae, Philemon became one of the congregational leaders. He's one of the people who received "the Letter to the Colossians."

As far as we know, Paul never visited Colossae, but it is clear from his letter to Philemon and to the Colossians, that he had heard about the ministry that was happening in that city.

+ + +

In those days, it was almost guaranteed that if you were a Roman citizen who owned property, if you owned a house, some of the property that you would own would be slaves. And one of Philemon's slaves was named Onesimus. We don't know what happened between them, but at some point Onesimus ran away. Maybe he stole something or cheated Philemon, but whatever happened, Onesimus left Colossae. And this was serious business. Runaway slaves who were caught would most likely be brutally beaten or put to death. They might even be crucified.

Somehow, after running away, Onesimus ends up 120 miles away in Ephesus, and ends up in the prison where Paul was being held captive. It may be a coincidence or it may be that Onesimus went looking for Paul with the hope that he might be able to help him. But after they connected,

Onesimus became a Christian and a beloved helper to Paul, who by now is an old man and doesn't see very well, who probably needs someone else to help him write his letters and to read to him and just generally care for him. And so he writes to Philemon and says, "I am appealing to you for **my child**, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment." Which was great! Except that Paul knew that Onesimus belonged to Philemon. His relationships with these two men put Paul in a tricky situation. And whether he thought slavery was right or wrong, he needed to take some kind of appropriate action.

New Testament scholar N.T Wright has said "that if the only document we had from early Christianity was the letter to Philemon we could deduce a very great deal about what Christianity was, from this letter alone because we know what happened to slaves in the ancient world and what is going on in this letter, by contrast, is just radically different. In this letter we can watch Paul in his theological and moral workshop dealing with a very immediate and pressing pastoral concern."

+ + +

Here's the problem. How is he going to get Philemon to not just forgive Onesimus, but to treat him as a fellow apostle and a brother in the faith? How is he going to convince Philemon to see Onesimus not as something less than, not as property but as another child of God – equally loved. And so Paul decides to write a letter. He begins by saying, *I am constantly thanking God for you in my prayers because I keep hearing about your love and faith toward our Lord Jesus. I pray that the partnership that springs up from your faith may be effective and that you will see all the good that we may do for the Lord. My friend, your love has made me joyful and has greatly encouraged me. It has also cheered the hearts of God's people.*

Ever get a letter like that? I get this kind of letter all the time. They come to me in my email. They are from people who want me to make out a large check to somebody, probably somewhere in west Africa and trust that all will be well. Or they have heard how faithful I am and wouldn't I like to buy this complete set of videotapes that will help me do my ministry even better. These files usually end up in my spam folder.

**But** if I got this letter from my bishop. Or my confirmation pastor. Or a favorite seminary professor, or I can't even image, from NT Wright, someone who is a big wig in theological circles. And it said, "Heidi I've heard about your faithfulness and I just wanted to say "Yeah you!" I think I would probably just sit in my office and read the letter all day long. And I think that's probably where Philemon was at. Paul was the guy who introduced him to Jesus. Paul was his teacher. His hero. An apostle with incredible credentials. So this is the kind of letter Philemon would have kept and shared with his family. "See what Paul wrote to me! Can you believe that?"

And then it really gets good.

Paul says, I'm writing to you on behalf of my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. And then he does a little word play. The name Onesimus means "useful," but Paul says, he was useless to you. A runaway slave has no value to the owner. But now, Paul says, he's useful to me and to you. He is like my own heart- so beloved, but I am sending him back to you.

Now, Paul could have hidden Onesimus. He could have sent him to one of the other churches in Asian Minor. He must have had friends who would have helped Onesimus get far away from the city of Colossae. But instead of avoiding a difficult situation, Paul sends Onesimus to deal with the consequences of his actions. He sends him to face Philemon. *I wanted to keep him with me, he writes, so that he could do for me what you would do. But I am sending him back.*

It's as if Paul is saying, *I know Philemon, that if you could, you'd be here to take care of me. But you have responsibilities and a family to care for, so I would never presume to ask you to come and help me. But Onesimus has given me the care that you would give if you were here. So I'd really like to keep him here with me, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.*

+ + +

Anybody have a grandmother like that. *I could have made you do this thing, but I want you to make the decision by yourself.*

What are you going to do the right thing or the wrong thing? Paul was a clever guy- a clever letter writer. The cynic in me is terribly impressed with Paul's ability to make his point. He couldn't have helped but smile or even smirk as he wrote that line. And Philemon may have smiled as well. How could he possibly miss what Paul was up to? He's putting the screws to him and he's doing it but good. About this point, NT Wright has said, that *Paul wanted to make positions clear to people – theological positions – moral positions. But he wanted to do it in such a way that it became embedded in their character and not something super imposed from the outside and that's a very delicate business.*

Wright goes on to make the point that rather than just telling Philemon what to do, Paul wanted to teach him how to think Christianly, so that he could grow as a human being and be able to figure out for himself then and in the future how God might want him to live.

It's an incredible lesson that we do well to learn from. And I think it's the reason we send our kids to Sunday School and Confirmation. It's the reason we come back to this place to hear the same stories over and over again. We are trying to live Christianly and so we need to have this stuff engrained within us so that we can respond to the activities around us without having to check with some other person as to "what would Jesus do." The intention is that we would know what God would have us do, not because the Bible says, "if you encounter this situation, here is the solution." Instead, we come here to get the tools needed to live a Christian life and we come back again and again to keep them sharp.

We can ask our kids to memorize scripture or test them to see if they know Luther's Small Catechism - but those things won't help if we don't help them to understand what they mean.

+ + +

Paul wraps up his argument by saying, *If you consider me your partner- if you see me as sharing a common work in Jesus Christ, then welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me.*

Now in the ancient world, the word Paul uses for "partner" was a business word. It meant that you had an agreement, a contract, an oath. But it wasn't just a pact that you made one year and forgot the next. Partnerships were life long commitments. They were serious stuff. It meant that you were invested in what this other person was doing. So Paul is saying to Philemon if you think we are partners, sworn to work together, sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ – then this is what partnership means for me. If we are really partners, you are going to treat Onesimus the same way you would treat me. Exactly the same. Welcome him to your home, not as a runaway slave, but as your brother in Jesus Christ. And then he says, if he's wronged you in any way, charge that to my account. If there is anything he has done to hurt you, consider that debt to be mine. And he says, *I am writing this in my own hand, so be clear, if there is anything that this has cost you, charge it to me Hold it against me. Make it mine to repay and not his. And by the way, I'm not going to say anything about the fact that you owe me your whole self. If it wasn't for me teaching you about Jesus, how would you*

have come to be saved? I'm not going to talk about that, but remember, Philemon, the reason you are a Christian is because I brought the message of the Lord to you. So now I am asking you to do this thing, not for me, although I could ask you to do it for me. I am asking you to do this because it is the right thing to do.

Here's the part they don't include in our readings- Paul says, *by the way I'm hoping to be out of jail soon and it would be really nice to come and visit you so if you make up a place for me, that would be great.*

That and his goodbyes are the bits you don't have in your bulletin. verse 22 says, *one thing more — prepare a guest room for me.* It's a great letter! How could Philemon not do what Paul asked? Paul has modeled the message that he preaches throughout the New Testament. He is demonstrating by his actions how the love of God can reconcile us to each other so that there is no longer Jew and Gentile; male and female; slave and free.

This is what it is to be forgiven. This is what it is to be made righteous. Paul is putting himself in the same kind of position Jesus did. Jesus stands between heaven and earth; between God and humanity – and says, *Father if they have done anything wrong, put it down on my account.* That's the image that Paul has created.

We don't know what Philemon chose to do, but it's probably safe to assume that he did what Paul asked. If he hadn't, the letter probably would have been destroyed immediately.

+ + +

Paul knew that what he was asking of Philemon was not a small thing. He was asking him to put Jesus first. To put his faith in God before his own personal interests. And asking Onesimus to go back to Colossae and face up to what might happen next was an even bigger deal. It meant putting his life on the line, in the hope that his master would treat him not as a person who had done something wrong, not as a criminal, not as a slave but instead as another child of God.

This is scary stuff that Jesus calls us to. This is hard stuff that we are invited to take on. It's not always easy. Living Christianly isn't about just being nice. It is about loving people, even your enemies. It's about forgiving people who do awful things to you and it's about caring for people you love as well as taking care of people who are not nice to you. Disciples must be brave and strong. Sooner or later every follower of Jesus has to do something hard. Has to make a decision for themselves, that *you know, I'd like to do this, but I know I need to do that. Because that's who God's called me to be.* But we are not alone. We need to be brave. We have partnership with each other. You have this community of faith to stand with you as partners in the gospel, to share with you and to encourage you and hold your hand when your hand needs holding.

We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We talk a lot of times about the church being a family- this is your church family! These are your brothers and sisters! These are the ones who stand with you in those hard moments, that you can lean into. Don't forget to be that one who is willing to be leaned on, but also that you can trust in this community to care for you. And that, that kind of love is what we share with the world.

Blessings on your week!