

13 Pentecost                      Philemon 1-21  
Christ and Grace                September 8, 2019  
Robin Teasley

Here we are, back to our regularly scheduled worship service. Some of us are basking in the warm memories of summer and some of us are getting excited about upcoming fall events. We have returned to reconnect with friends and welcome the choir's return. We have come to hear the Word of God and how it relates to our lives. We probably didn't come to church to hear Jeremiah telling us that God is a potter shaping evil against us.

And then what about the Gospel reading? Preacher Will Willemon says, "Jesus is not always the answer to all of your problems. In fact Jesus became the cause of a lot of your problems after you met him." Don't we hate it when Jesus says something we don't want to hear?

After hearing how hard it is to follow Jesus, how costly discipleship is going to be, who is going to want to volunteer for anything? Who's going to come back next week? These texts are good ones, but best explored in a Bible study, not a ten-minute sermon. And then there is the Epistle.

The Letter to Philemon is one of the shortest books, and one that many of us have no idea how to pronounce. Growing up Baptist, and in the South, I always heard it pronounced it fie LEE mon, but after becoming an Episcopalian I heard everyone in our EfM class pronounce it FILL a mon. It seems both are acceptable, but the Baptists are closer to the original Greek with fie LEE mon.

Scholars think that this is one of the genuine Letters of Paul – not just a letter attributed to him. It's the only one of his epistles that is addressed, not to an entire church or Christian community, but to an individual and a few of his companions. We do not know with certainty all the details behind the letter but it's clearly an appeal on Paul's part to Philemon. He's writing on behalf of one of his companions named Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves who has run away, embraced the Christian faith, and found his way to Paul's inner circle. Interestingly, his owner, Philemon, is also a Christian and is a friend or follower of Paul.

Paul, doing the right thing, is sending Onesimus back to Philemon along with this "cover letter," asking that Onesimus be treated well upon his return and not be punished for his escape or for any damage he may have caused during his servitude. Paul pays tribute to Philemon with kind words of praise - likely in the hope that Philemon will allow Onesimus to return and continue his work and ministry with Paul. You see, in his time with Paul, Onesimus has been quite useful. In fact, that is what Onesimus means in Greek... useful.<sup>1</sup>

Notice Paul's play on words – "formerly he was useless to you but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me." What is Paul saying? Onesimus had escaped or run away from his owner Philemon – a missing slave is not of much use! And how could he be trusted even if he were found and returned? But something happened when Onesimus met Paul. Paul shared God's love

---

<sup>1</sup> The name Onesimus is an adjective that derives from ονησω (*oneso*), the future tense of the verb ονινημι (*oninemi*), meaning to be of use or of benefit or of profit.

with him and he became useful, he became Onesimus, he became exactly who God created him to be. And what about Philemon? We know there are always two sides to every story, and so often we presume we are right and they are wrong. Philemon may have thought that Onesimus didn't deserve forgiveness.

In a commentary on this passage Martin Luther said, "All of us are God's Onesimus." We are slaves. We merit nothing. We have done things that are wrong. We stand before a God who is righteous and holy, and yet the Lord Jesus says, "If he has done anything wrong, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I will pay it."

Even if we are not accountants, we are all pretty good at keeping our "offense account". That mental list of the offenses we have suffered, the hurts others have inflicted on us. And we know we are called to forgive. But it's not easy.

I think this may what Jesus is getting at when he tells us to estimate the costs of discipleship. We all know that saying, "Don't get mad, get even!" And we also know that getting even is not a Christian thing to do, even though the feeling that a debt is owed when others hurt us is real. As disciples we must keep in mind that true biblical forgiveness does not mean that the offense that has been committed is "nothing", however it does mean that we need to make an honest attempt to make our grievances clear with each other and make some level of amends, all the while leaving the judgment with God.

And this is what Paul shows us how to do as he intercedes for Onesimus and Philemon. This letter shows us a side of Paul that is loving, thoughtful, diplomatic and persuasive. He stands between two parishioners who are at serious odds, asking them not only to be reconciled to each other but also to model the new life in Christ to which the entire church is called. The driving force behind the letter is Paul's desire for reconciling love to be practiced within the community.

Most likely Onesimus had wronged Philemon and needed to make amends. But something happened to Onesimus when he met Paul - he was transformed in hearing the good news and given new life in Christ. When he returned to Philemon he was no longer the same; he was who God created him to be – useful to the mission of God.

And so Paul is asking Philemon if he is willing and able to believe that Christ's love has the power to transform! Paul is acting as an intercessor or mediator for Onesimus and Philemon. Are we not all in need of a mediator? Do we not have one in Jesus? How can we then not intercede on behalf of one another?

What if we adopted this approach? We have all experienced conflict in relationships at home, at work, with friends over politics. We don't all agree all the time on everything. People make mistakes, they wrong one another, they owe one another, they deserve judgment and even punishment at times. We call this retributive justice and it's a strong theme in the Hebrew scripture for sure. But Christ came to reveal a new way to be in relationship through restorative justice; a justice that does not seek to get even but rather desires to heal and strengthen relationships.

Paul modeled the way of Jesus, the work of divine grace we are to practice with one another. Regardless of what has happened in the past, the love of Christ transforms. This is the power of the cross Jesus calls us to carry. It has the power to bring about reconciliation if we will allow it to work in our lives. It is the power of the cross that makes us who we have been created to be, so that we can join with Christ and Paul to do the transforming work of God in the world.

All of us are God's Onesimus. We fall down, we get up, we forgive and are forgiven. That is the good news. Now what will we do with this good news? Each day we have the opportunity to be useful for God as we practice sharing God's love and grace with everyone we encounter – at home, school, work, in the grocery store, the drive thru line, the waiting room – wherever it is that you will go this week you can be useful for God.

When we believe in the transformative, reconciling love of God we become, each one of us, an Onesimus. We become exactly who God created us to be. How will we be Onesimus in this place? How will we be useful to God? May Paul's prayer be ours, "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ."

Amen.