

I, Philemon

Colossians 4:1-9 Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 14:25-33 September 4, 2016 Pentecost 16

Book of Philemon

(Reader) Today we will consider a whole book of the Bible which talks about Christian freedom; a freedom to love that tears down barriers. The scripture readings that you heard earlier just set the context for this book. It's a very short book, one of the shortest in the Bible. It is Paul's letter to Philemon.

We want you to hear the letter to Philemon in a different way. When we listen to scripture, we think of it *as* scripture, a message from God, and that's good. But we listen in a different way than we might hear, say, a text message from a friend left on the phone. To help you understand Philemon in a new way, you'll have to use your imaginations. Paul wrote Colossians and Philemon at the same time. Colossians was an epistle to a church, a formal document to be read in worship. Philemon, however, was a personal note sent along with it. So it's almost like reading somebody else's mail.

So imagine that you are gathered for Christian worship in Colossi, a medium-sized city in what is now Turkey, back in the time of Paul, when Christianity was almost a brand-new thing. Some of you are merchants, some slaves, some soldiers, a few are from wealthy families; many of you are poor and powerless. Unlike the treatment you would receive in the Roman society around you, people in this room are treated with more or less equal love and respect, as brothers and sisters in Christ. You are not in a church building, for those hadn't been invented yet. Rather, you are in a large home, a house-church that belongs to Philemon. Philemon is a lay leader of the church at Colossi, and he's a moderately wealthy merchant. As Philemon stands to speak, you notice a few raised eyebrows, some subtle whispers. His face looks not quite tense, but very thoughtful and reflective. He speaks.

"I, Philemon, welcome you—all of you. You are my brothers and sisters in Christ. As you may have heard, Onesimus, who was a slave in my household and ran away, has returned. He came bearing two letters from our beloved Paul. To be quite frank, I was angry when I saw Onesimus, because he had run away. And I felt responsibility to the structures of society to maintain civil order, and treat him harshly. But then I read the letter. And Paul encouraged me to share it with you. And I will, even though it puts me somewhat on the spot. (ahem)

I, Paul, am a prisoner for the sake of Christ, here with my brother Timothy. I write this letter to you, Philemon, my good friend and companion in this work - 2 also to our sister Apphia, to Archippus, a real trooper, and to the church that meets in your house. 3 God's best to you! Christ's blessings on you! 4 Every time your name comes up in my prayers, I say, "Oh, thank you, God!" 5 I keep hearing of the love and faith you have for the Master Jesus, which brims over to other Christians. 6 And I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it. 7 Friend, you have no idea how good your love makes me feel, doubly so when I see your hospitality to fellow believers. 8 In line with all this I have a favor to ask of you. As Christ's ambassador and now a prisoner for him, I wouldn't hesitate to command this if I thought it necessary, 9 but I'd rather make it a personal request. 10 While here in jail, I've fathered a child, so to speak. And here he is, hand-carrying this letter - Onesimus! 11 He was useless to you before; now he's useful to both of us. 12 I'm sending him back to you, but it feels like I'm cutting off my right arm in doing so. 13 I wanted in the worst way to keep him here as your stand-in to help out while I'm in jail for the Message. 14 But I didn't want to do anything behind your back, make you do a good deed that you hadn't willingly agreed to. 15 Maybe it's all for the best that you lost him for a while. You're getting him back now for good - 16 and no mere slave this time, but a true Christian brother! That's what he was to me - he'll be even more than that to you. 17 So if you still consider me a comrade-in-arms, welcome him back as you would me. 18 If he damaged anything or owes you anything, chalk it up to my account. 19 This is my personal signature - Paul - and I stand behind it. (I don't need to remind you, do I, that you owe your very life to me?) 20 Do me this big favor, friend. You'll be doing it for Christ, but it will also do my heart good. 21 I know you well enough to know you will. You'll probably go far beyond what I've written. 22 And by the way, get a room ready for me. Because of your prayers, I fully expect to be your guest again. 23 Epaphras, my cellmate in the cause of Christ, says hello. 24 Also my coworkers Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke. 25 All the best to you from the Master, Jesus Christ!

(pause) That Paul. He's really something, isn't he? It isn't an easy decision to make, but Paul is right, as usual. The one who left as a runaway slave is now a brother in Christ. Please. Accept him as I have. Maybe someday when the gospel works in the hearts of all people, there will be no more slaves, and all will be one with Christ, as Onesimus—once slave, now a brother—and I are today.¹ (pause)

Now, back to today. As you heard the letter read in context, did you notice Paul's persuasive power at work? He lifts up Philemon as a real joy, a

¹ As translated by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, Tynsdale House Publishers, 2005.

true friend. Paul could command, because Paul had save Philemon and owed him his very soul. But instead, Paul appealed to Philemon on the basis of love. Onesimus, the runaway slave, had become like a son to Paul—and Philemon wouldn't want to reject Paul's son, would he? Paul had promised to pay Onesimus's debts to Philemon. Paul said that he was tempted to keep Onesimus with him, but out of respect for Philemon, he would send him back and hope that he would be received as a brother in Christ. See what we mean about Paul putting Philemon on the spot? Wouldn't Philemon be a cold-hearted person to say no to Paul, to treat Onesimus as a piece of property? Hadn't Paul said, "Do me this big favor, friend. You'll be doing it for Christ, but it will also do my heart good."

We don't know what happened. We don't know if Philemon set Onesimus free, or kept him as a slave. But I have a hunch that Philemon set him free. If he had said no, who would have bothered to save the letter? Why would it have found its way into the Bible? We don't know the outcome, but William Barclay pointed out that several years later, there was a Christian bishop in that area of Asia Minor—who had oversight over several house churches there—and his name was Onesimus. Could it have been the same person? Could the runaway slave have become a Christian leader? Maybe. Bishop Onesimus, by the way, later died a martyr's death.

The letter to Philemon is a wonderful human interest story. But what does it tell us today? First of all, it tells us never to give up on anybody. The slave's name, Onesimus, literally meant "Useful" or worthwhile. Paul wasn't above making a few puns. "Now good old Useful may have been useless to you, but he sure is useful to me," is basically what he said. Sometimes we should let God's grace be at work in the lives of people that we are tempted to abandon as useless. It can happen. Lives can be transformed.

We also hear the message that we should treat people of lesser standing than ourselves with dignity and respect. Treating each other in such a way allows us to transform relationships. The person who waits our table or rings up our groceries, the person who does our odd jobs, the person standing at an intersection with "Will work for food" scrawled on a piece of cardboard are all God's children.

The story also gives us clues as to how to change a bad situation. Transforming bad situations can be a better alternative than tackling them head-on. Paul didn't denounce slavery—that would have been suicide in a culture where slavery had the force of law and empire behind it. Rather, he could plant the seeds that would eventually abolish it. He helped people see in a transformed way, that a slave was a human being, too; a child of God, too. Abraham Lincoln came to the presidency when the question of slavery was tearing our nation apart. In one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, he used the golden rule. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

Lincoln asked, "Would you want to be treated as a slave? Then why should you treat others as one?" Basic, simple Christianity. It was that same spirit that Paul chose to undermine slavery by transforming a relationship. Slave to master became friend to friend. Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon