

Pentecost 16
September 4 , 2016

“Paul, Philemon, Onesimus and Forgiveness”

PHILEMON 1:1,10-21

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker—

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. ¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰ I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

I want to introduce myself to you. My name is Onesimus. I am a slave who ran away from my master Philemon. Before running away, I stole some money from him. That helped me get to the city of Rome as far away as possible from Colosse where my master lived. I thought I could start a new life in Rome as a free man rather than a slave. But then something happened to me that changed my life. I met someone who told me about Jesus my Savior who redeemed me from slavery of sin. He introduced me to a man, an old man, who was a prisoner in Rome, under house arrest, a man named Paul.

Paul became like a father to me as he led me to see the depth of Jesus' love for a sinner like me. My life changed completely. Instead of being selfish and living for myself, I began living my life for Jesus who loved me and gave his life for me. I became like a son to Paul helping him reach other people with the message of the gospel.

But now there is one part of my life that still needs changing. I need to go back to Colosse and make things right with my master Philemon. I know my sins of the past have been forgiven through Jesus, but now I want to ask my master to forgive me for being unfaithful to him. Paul is writing a letter for Philemon that I can give to him. I hope and pray this very personal letter will lead Philemon to forgive me for what I have done to him.

It's been a long trip from Rome to Colosse. Here I am now, walking up to the door to his house with this letter in my hand. I knock on the door, my heart is pounding with fear. My master comes to the door and I fall to my knees. "Philemon, please forgive me. Please forgive me for what I have done to you. Here is a letter from the Apostle Paul that tells

you what has happened to me and the change that has taken place in my life.”

And now we watch as Philemon takes the letter in his hand and begins to read. “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon, our dear friend and fellow worker.”

“Is it true Onesimus? Paul is a prisoner in Rome? That doesn’t surprise me. Paul always seems to getting himself thrown into prison. Timothy is with him. That’s good. He calls me his friend. That’s nice to hear. And he says that I am his fellow worker. Those are nice words.”

We leave Philemon for a moment to reflect on these words that he just read. Here is a man who seems to be quite wealthy because in the next verse Paul asks him to greet the church that meets in his home. Like many wealthy people living in the Roman Empire at this time he owned slaves. As Christianity spreads in the Roman Empire wealthy landowners gave up the practice of having slaves.

Philemon probably heard about Jesus through the mission work that Paul was doing in the city of Ephesus. He is part of that new congregation in Colosse about a hundred miles from Ephesus. Paul wrote a letter to this group of Christians. He told them, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts towards God.” Some of the best moments in this man’s life were the times he gathered with other Christians in his home to be close to God’s word and to sing to each other with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

He reads on in this letter. “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.” “Onesimus, is this true? Has Paul become like a father to you and have you become like son to him.” Onesimus humbly lowers his head and says, “Yes.”

So we reflect on these words. When the Word of the Lord comes into the lives of people, it changes them. They are born again as Jesus said by the power of the Holy Spirit. It wasn’t an accident that Onesimus met up with Christians in Rome who led him to the Apostle Paul. It was not an accident that Onesimus became like a son to Paul. This was God’s amazing grace in his life. God’s grace is no different in your lives dear Christians.

Think of how privileged this runaway slave was. He could hear Paul describe firsthand how Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. He could hear Paul tell how he once believed he could be saved by his religious zeal but then gave it all up to cling to Christ and his righteousness. He had the privilege of watching as Roman guards started taking an interest in what Paul had to say about Jesus. Paul was not exaggerating when he wrote to the Philippians, “It has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else, I am in chains for Christ.” Onesimus had a hand in all of this because he was like a son to Paul.

Philemon reads further. “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and me.” “That’s certainly true. He was sure useless to me. He even stole some of my money.”

So we reflect on these words. The name Onesimus actually means "useful." He proved to be anything but useful to his master Philemon. Worthless would be a better name for him. If we take an honest look at our lives as they would be without Christ we would have to confess that we are useless to the Lord. All our righteousness is like filthy rags in God's sight. But now in Christ, connected to Christ, with his forgiveness and with his righteousness every sin of the past is removed as far as the east is from the west. Our lives are now useful for the Lord, pleasing to him, and the fruit we bear out of love for Christ is precious in the sight of the Lord. "We are God's workmanship created in Christ to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do." Martin Luther wrote, "We are Christ's Onesimuses, restored by Christ, who by giving us his rights, compelled the Father to lay aside his wrath."

Back to Philemon as he reads the heartwarming words from Paul written personally to him. "I am sending him- who is my very heart-back to you. I would like to keep him with me so that he could be your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel." "Is that true Onesimus? Did you deeply touch the heart of Paul?" Onesimus bows his head and humbly says, "Yes, we were very close."

Now we reflect on these words. This letter of Paul is very emotional. In fact the Greek word for heart is actually the stomach or the bowels. Where do we feel our emotions? Not in the heart but in the stomach. More than once Paul was deeply moved by what he saw in Onesimus with his loyalty to Christ and also to him. How hard it was for him to say goodbye to this man who was like a son to him. He knows that Onesimus will bring the same deep feelings of joy to Philemon because he is a totally new person in Christ. To the Philippians Paul wrote, "For me to live is Christ." He saw the same view of life in Onesimus, someone who was lost but now is found.

Philemon reads on. "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good, no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as brother in the Lord." "How can I not see God's hand in all of this? He ran away from me and away from the Lord. But now the Lord has rescued him and brought him back not just to serve me as my servant but to be my brother and my son in the Lord."

So we reflect on our relationship to other Christians. Whatever our calling in life may be, we are brothers and sisters in Christ. On this Labor Day weekend we think of those who employ workers and those who work for employers. We think of rich and poor, male and female, gifted and not so gifted. In Christ we are brothers and sisters who have the deepest love and respect for each other. As we heard in our sermon last week from Hebrews chapter thirteen. "Keep on loving each others as brothers."

Philemon reads on. "So consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I Paul am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back-not to mention that you owe me your very self." "What an amazing man Paul is? He tells me to charge it to his account if Onesimus owes me anything. I doubt if Paul has a denarius to his name. Yet, I owe him my very life, for it was through his preaching and teaching I have been redeemed from the pit. Through him, I am the richest man in the whole world."

So we reflect on these words. When Paul says, "Charge it to me!" don't you think of Jesus coming to this world and saying to his heavenly Father, "Charge it to me." "Put it on my tab." "I will cover the charges." Jesus did that for Paul, and for Onesimus and for Philemon and for you and me. He took the huge debt we have accumulated and place it all on himself. "He became sin for us who knew no sin." "The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all." Jesus put our sins on his tab. He paid it in full. When he finished the payment he cried out "It is finished." The Father accepted the full payment by raising his son to life again. How rich we are in Christ.

Philemon reads on. "I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask." There he goes again. He is asking me to refresh his heart. He wants me to move him emotionally by how I welcome Onesimus back into my house. He wants me to be a father to him. He wants me to be a brother in Christ to him. Oh, Paul how can I not do this for Onesimus when I think of what Jesus has done for me."

So we reflect on this. Once again Paul is urging Philemon to make him emotional and touch his heart with the good news he has welcomed Onesimus back, forgiven him and given him opportunities to serve. Think of the father holding his lost son in his arms, his body heaving with emotion, his son shaking in his arms, tears streaming down the face of both father and son. Moved to tears of joy because of the forgiveness we have in Christ, we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Amen.