

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 1, Philemon 1-21, Luke 14:25-33

“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.”

Today is one of the few chances in the lectionary to explore the story of St. Paul’s letter to Philemon. Our passage for today is the whole of this short letter, except for a few short verses of farewell at the end.

So the whole story is in these 21 verses, or at least as much of the story as we know. St. Paul was writing to people who knew the circumstances he was describing, and so we don’t get every detail that we outside hearers of this letter might want. This is one of the rare personal letters in Scripture, written from an individual to another individual - although it is also for the whole Church to hear.

So what is the story in Philemon? Philemon is a man, somewhat well off, who gathers a congregation of the Church in his house. We think that Apphia was his wife, and Archippus also was likely a member of the household – perhaps their son.

And they owned a slave. Onesimus.

And something happened in their home, and Onesimus ran away. Perhaps he ran simply seeking freedom. Or perhaps he did something – lost money, or stole, or something - Paul mentions that Onesimus may owe Philemon some debt. And so, perhaps in trouble, Onesimus ran away from his master, from his Christian owner.

And he found Paul, in prison. And Paul became like a father to this runaway slave, and Onesimus became like his son.

Perhaps it was then that Onesimus was baptized and became a Christian himself. Onesimus cares for St. Paul in prison and wants to stay with him. And Paul would like him to stay.

But instead, Paul sends him back to Philemon, bearing this letter. It’s a gamble, especially to Onesimus, who is going back as a runaway slave. He is at risk of being beaten or worse. He is at risk of returning to servitude and suffering after this time of freedom and joy and friendship.

But Paul is firm that Onesimus must go and face Philemon. And if he is firm with Onesimus in sending him back, he is firm also with Philemon, the former master.

St. Paul is sometimes criticized today for not taking a stronger stance against the evil of slavery in his day. He doesn’t speak out against it much, and doesn’t advocate for broad societal change. Does this mean he supported slavery?

Paul’s worldview seems to have been most profoundly shaped by his expectation that Jesus was returning very soon. The most urgent thing for Paul was to get the message of the gospel – of love and life and spiritual freedom in Jesus Christ to as many people as possible.

I don’t think he thought there was time for such a big change as ending slavery in the entire Roman Empire. And he did not want to lose any time away from his primary mission of spreading the good news of Jesus. For this reason he says things like his words in Colossians chapter seven - “Each person should stay in the situation

in which they were called.” Certainly you can be a Christian as a slave, and so Paul calls all Christians to work to spread the gospel in whatever circumstances they find themselves in.

But he continues in Colossians: “Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you--although if you can gain your freedom, do so.” He encourages slaves to not despair in their servitude. But he also makes it clear that he knows the value of freedom, and commends slaves to seek it if possible. But for Paul, that is still not the most important thing. More crucial is a relationship with Jesus Christ and knowledge of his saving love.

So St. Paul did not take on the whole, massive institution of Roman slavery and knock it down. He focused his energies on sharing the love of God with countless people, including many slaves like Onesimus.

But Paul had opinions. And in this letter, he tells Philemon that if he calls himself a Christian man, he will free Onesimus.

The whole world is changed because of the reconciling death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. People who were once strangers, or enemies, or oppressors and victims, become united by baptism and are made brothers and sisters.

As St. Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, “There is neither slave nor free, but all are one in Christ.” And so this relationship of slavery – of power, and oppression, and abuse, is unacceptable between Christians. Paul makes this clear to Philemon – he *must* free Onesimus. Because he cannot own his brother.

Paul uses some diplomatic language in this letter, but that should not obscure for us the force of his words. How does he start to Philemon? “I could command you to do your duty.” And that duty is to free Onesimus – there is no question that this is the intent and demand of this letter.

But Paul says he would rather appeal to Philemon’s heart, out of love. Yet, he appeals as an elder and a prisoner for the name of Christ. He says, “If he owes you anything . . . I will repay it. I say nothing about you owing me even your own self.” Paul is laying his authority on heavily. Philemon can’t actually refuse St. Paul’s appeal.

While Paul did not organize slave revolts, he was uncompromising with Philemon about the necessity of freeing his brother in Christ.

Once Paul’s eyes were opened to God’s love in Jesus Christ, once he became a Christian, he could not see the world the same way or accept the broken, sinful cruelty of its inhabitants. Paul suffered and risked his life trying to teach people to love instead – to love God and to love their neighbors. To be willing to die to show them that love. And so, he has no tolerance for Philemon to hold Onesimus in slavery.

But there is a second reason, too, that I think Paul chose to send Onesimus back to Philemon, when he could have just stayed with Paul in hiding. And this was to bring about reconciliation. There was a broken relationship between Christians – between Philemon and Onesimus - that could not be ignored. Paul demanded reconciliation between these two brothers in Christ.

What a painful, awkward, near-impossible reconciliation that must have been for these two men. For Onesimus to risk returning to his old master, and lay aside the anger, even hatred, he may have felt for him. For Philemon to lay aside his anger at Onesimus’ escape, and to have to swallow his pride of ownership and to treat Onesimus instead as an equal.

There is such inherent sin and brokenness in the relationship of a master and a slave, that it would be one of the most difficult, one would think impossible, relationships to bring reconciliation to.

But Paul did not fear this difficulty and pain. I don't think he felt there was any choice. Peace had to be made between Christians.

This letter is an intense example of how difficult living as a Christian can, and should, be. It changes everything about how we should live with others. It makes us have to do things that are uncomfortable, unconventional, that are difficult and painful. Like swallow our pride and seek reconciliation, even if we don't even really want it.

God urgently desires this for us.

I think it's clear why this personal letter from Paul to Philemon made it into the canon of Scripture. We can see the powerful Christian themes that speak to us out of this letter. Some of us may hear the urgent call for reconciliation in the angry, bitter, and broken relationships in our lives.

But God's call to reconciliation is also a call that can easily tempt us to think, "What an important message! – for someone else." We can be remarkably blind to pride and sin and petty cruelty in our own behavior and relationships.

It's so easy to discount offhanded criticisms, jokes at another's expense that shame them in front of friends or colleagues or family, words spoken in anger that we're too proud to apologize for. Complacency about suffering and injustice in the world. The ways we deliberately suppress our empathy because we don't want to acknowledge our role in the pain of others.

I think one of the most toxic types of broken relationships I have seen are those where someone has such grievances against the other party – sometimes real and serious grievances – that they become blind to the pain that they themselves inflict. One of the hardest things in reconciling couples or friends can be getting a person to see the part they play – in treating their partner with contempt, or creating a state of constant hostility that makes their partner defensive and sets them up to collect more grievances against them. It's hard to face and acknowledge the pain *we* cause, the sin *we* commit.

Being in relationship with other people, and being a Christian in relationship with other people, is endlessly difficult! We were warned. Jesus, in the passage from our gospel today, turns to the massive crowd that has begun following him and asks them if they realize what they are getting themselves into. Do they know the difficulty, and the cost of following him? Are they truly willing to take up a cross and offer themselves up to suffer for love of others?

Most of us here were baptized as Christians before we ever made a conscious decision or commitment to follow Christ. But many of us remember our baptisms, or our confirmations. Did we sit down, like the builder or the king in Jesus' parables today, and calculate what the cost of discipleship would be?

I think if we did, if we truly recognized how we have to sacrifice our pride, and beg for forgiveness, and forgive those we don't want to forgive, if we recognized that being a Christian is tremendously hard, and sometimes unpleasant, but unspeakably beautiful, and selfless, and noble, then we might know the thrill and the passion of those early Christians, who risked everything to bear the Name of Jesus. Who had the courage to love each other even when it seemed nearly impossible.

And we might shine as lights to the world, bring about miracles in love, and lead many to God.

Amen.