

Sermon preached at Grace Episcopal Church in Alexandria, VA on September 8, 2019.  
Proper 18, Year C (RCL): Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

**I speak to you in the Name of God: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Today, as we are called to contemplate the cost of discipleship, we might be aided by a personal prayer I created from Paul's request to Philemon: 'Refresh my heart in Christ. Sustained by the company and forgiveness of the Christ in the blessed sacrament and recalling God's grace in remembrance of baptism, strengthen us in this hour to "choose life" – to choose life in God as our own.' This prayer, and all of today's lessons, focuses on this urgency to choose wisely.

From the Book of Deuteronomy, we hear Moses speaking to the Israelites, who are about to enter the land promised to their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In this passage, Moses lays out the stark choice before them: to choose life by loving and obeying the Lord; or to choose death by following other gods.

In the Epistle, while Paul was in prison, he was aided by a runaway slave named Onesimus. The slave's master, Philemon, was a Christian friend of Paul. Paul instructed Onesimus to return to his master and encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus back as his Christian brother. The choice was Philemon's.

And in the Gospel according to St. Luke, Jesus speaks frankly about the fearsome costs of discipleship. Those who follow him should know from the outset that completing the course of discipleship will finally mean renouncing all other allegiances. This choice is ours.

Freedom. Freedom is one of the most important concepts in any language, and particularly in the language spoken between God and God's people. Our scriptures today point to the importance and reality of freedom of choice, as well as the importance of the choices many of us have the freedom or duty to make. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news of a God who chooses to never stop loving us – no matter what. We are encouraged today to keep our eyes on the prize as we make choices that reflect our discipleship, choices that increasingly model the freedom to "choose life."

Jesus never made distinctions that faith, prayer and worship, were set apart from our human relationships and daily labors. In fact, some of Jesus' harshest words of condemnation were reserved for those religious authorities who vainly thought their worship of God and their temple life could be separated from their life in the world. When he talked about judgment, Jesus put the measure for it in the realm of human relationship: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matt 25:40). Jesus promised life and life cannot be restricted to a certain segment of our existence; life permeates all of life. The leaven of Christ's spirit infuses and shapes the whole loaf of life. Our choices rely on the spirit.

Some academics have implied that St. Paul changed the religion of Jesus, which throbbed with life, into an arid doctrinal system. But this little letter alone, all twenty-five verses of it, refutes such a false view of Paul. Paul's letter to Philemon illustrates both the Spirit of Christ and the impact of choice. This letter, I believe, is about Love and Challenge. Paul reflects deeply on the theological implications of the gospel, and he argues vehemently against "false" doctrines, feeling compelled to state clearly and convincingly what Christians believe – but all this is grounded in his transforming personal experience of Jesus Christ. This letter to Philemon resonates with an understanding of life that Jesus set forth particularly in his Sermon on the Mount, and offers dynamic witness to the meaning of faith in the marketplace.

Paul opens his letter with elemental reality, he acknowledges his faithful companions. His letter is to Philemon, but he doesn't forget Philemon's wife Apphia, his son Archippus, or the church which meets in their house. He calls Philemon "our dear friend and co-worker," Apphia "our sister," and Archippus "our fellow soldier."

Paul acknowledges Philemon's love for and faith in the Lord and expresses his joy and consolation in Philemon's love for him. Can anything be more important than that – who we are in relation to Christ and how we act in relation to others? In verse 7, Paul commends Philemon for building up the entire Christian community through the strength of his love and how he gives that love to others. It is no wonder that Paul call him "brother." Paul emphasizes to us that you measure people by their commitment to press on to attain the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

As Paul makes his plea for Onesimus, his words are artful, tender, sensitive, brilliant, understanding and convincing. There is a balance of conviction and compassion – conviction about the worth of Onesimus, a slave become a Christian; and tender compassion for Philemon, and the dilemma of a slave-master become a Christian.

Having this reading fall in this year -- the 400th Anniversary of the Arrival of the First Africans in Virginia – brings Paul's words to new life for us. The United States is beginning to acknowledge how the realities of slavery in our nation have shaped and continue to affect our lives.

Last month, The Rt. Rev. Susan E. Goff, Bishop Suffragan and Ecclesiastical Authority of the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia, offered prayers during a gathering of state leaders to mark the anniversary of the arrival at Jamestown. She prayed to God, "You were here ... when the first African people were brought here, in harrowing circumstances, against their will. You were with our ancestors, men and women of diverse races and cultures, through triumph and adversity, though hope and fear. In the same way that you were with your people then, be with us now as we remember the relationships and legacies that have shaped us as Americans today. Forgive us the ways that we have hurt and exploited one another. Give us the courage to do the hard work of real reconciliation. And bless our continued efforts for justice, freedom and peace for everyone in this land - everyone, without exception."<sup>1</sup> With these words, Bishop Goff acknowledged both the worth of the enslaved people and the slave owners, just as Paul had.

The power of the Good News shines through this letter to Philemon, with its markings, both faint and obvious, of the redeeming love of Christ that transforms persons, relationships, and circumstances. Philemon, a wealthy man, hears Paul preach. Captured by the message, he becomes a Christian along with his wife and son. Philemon eventually emerges as a leader in the church that grows up in Colossae and his house becomes one of the meeting places for this new Christian community.

Now, what about Onesimus? He was apparently a runaway slave from Philemon's household who may have financed his escape by robbing his master. Somehow, the fugitive met Paul, was converted by him, and became the Apostle's valued helper and companion. A common name for a slave, Onesimus means "useful" or "profitable," and Paul played on this word when he beseeched Philemon to release Onesimus: "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me." Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon in the hope that he would bless his slave with freedom and perhaps return him, for by then Paul regarded Onesimus as "my child" and "beloved brother." Paul implied that, by his apostolic

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<sup>1</sup> [www.thediocese.net/news/prayers-and-a-litany-for-the-400th-anniversary-of-arrival-of-first-africans-in/](http://www.thediocese.net/news/prayers-and-a-litany-for-the-400th-anniversary-of-arrival-of-first-africans-in/)

authority, he could simply order Philemon to release Onesimus. But he preferred the gentler approach as outlined in his letter. Our choices empower our lives.

This past week, Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS) acknowledged that enslaved persons worked on the campus, and that even after slavery ended, the seminary participated in segregation. Therefore, with hope “to repair the material consequences of our sin in the past,” VTS announced the establishment of an endowment from which the income will fund reparation. Dean Ian Markham said, “This is the seminary recognizing that along with repentance for past sins, there is also a need for action.” This echoes Paul’s request for Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul and the offer to make restitution for any wrongs done to Philemon.

One more example: In a 2014 Pastoral letter to his Diocese of Maryland about the important work of becoming and living as a Beloved Community, Bishop Eugene T. Sutton wrote: “Beloved, it will be by our lives and actions with regard to racial reconciliation that we will speak most prophetically to the world. In this way, we are writing a “living Epistle” to the whole Church. This holy missive was begun with God’s call of freedom to the people of Israel in Egypt, continued with Jesus’ proclamation of freedom to the captives in the synagogue, and Paul’s invitation to his friend Philemon to free his slave Onesimus. It continues through the action and dedication of our forebears in the Civil Rights era who were convicted by the Gospel imperative of love and justice.”<sup>2</sup>

The gospel’s power claimed by Bishops Goff and Sutton is expressed with subtlety in Paul’s letter, and also with explosive force. Verses 15-16 read, “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 – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

If this is not the outward and complete destruction of an oppressive order, the dynamite has been planted, the fuse is lit, and the coming demolition is certain. When slaves become brothers, the system has lost its control! To become inwardly free is the first, the giant, and the necessary step from which all that follows in terms of the revolution and change of outward circumstances and social status will come. When Rosa Parks, that tiny black woman in Birmingham, Alabama, refused to move to the back of the bus, an irreversible tsunami of justice in civil rights began “to roll like a river.”

British philosopher John Cowper Powys once defined Love as “always in the mood of believing in miracles.” Love is so much more than that, but it is at least and always that. Love believes in miracles for Love is miracle. That is the reason oppressive force has no place in sharing the gospel – only Love. Paul knew this. We do too, don’t we? When we can relate to persons in such a way, and love them to the degree we can call them “my friend,” miracles happen.

This is what happens when we choose life – the life God offered the Israelites, the life Paul encourages Philemon to choose for Onesimus, the life Jesus challenges us to choose over all other desires.

I don’t know if anyone has ever characterized St. Paul of being a progenitor of Liberation Theology, but his plea to Philemon and advocacy that Onesimus be freely accepted as a brother in the faith just might qualify him as such.

Again, I invite you to consider translating Paul’s request to Philemon into a personal prayer for your day: ‘Refresh my heart in Christ. Sustained by the company and forgiveness of

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<sup>2</sup> [https://drive.google.com/file/d/17RnAeV2D4\\_13bKJOOHASTxtzBF6lik/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/17RnAeV2D4_13bKJOOHASTxtzBF6lik/view)

the Christ in the blessed sacrament and recalling God's grace in remembrance of baptism, strengthen us in this hour to "choose life" – to choose life in God as our own.'  
AMEN.