

Sermon Notes for 9/4/16 (Pentecost 16, Labor Day Weekend)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Philemon

Theme: DISCIPLESHIP'S COSTLY DEMANDS

The Point: Jesus calls each of us to selfless, sacrificial love of the neighbor, even that neighbor who we may consider is “beneath us.”

Introduction: How we view other people influences how we interact with them. If you see other people as “beneath” you, you will act in ways that deny your Creator (and theirs). That has been true for all of human history. Cain looked at Abel with jealousy and imagined that he was above his brother, enough above that he could even determine the time for his brother to die. David saw Uriah the Hittite as beneath himself (maybe because David was his commander-in-chief), and that led him to adultery and murder, as well as the cover-up that followed. We come to the first century AD and the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon.

Onesimus was a slave. In the first century of the modern era, there were many slaves. Slavery was a common and assumed way of life for thousands upon thousands of men, women and children. Augustus imposed a 2% sales tax on sales of slaves, and indications from the records are that some 250,000 slave sales took place annually. That's a lot of turnover! Historians typically estimate 30-40% of the population of Italy were slaves in the early centuries of the modern era.

Of course, many slaves were brought back to the homeland by Rome's legions as they won victories in foreign lands. But it was also approved, at least in certain periods of Rome's history, for parents to sell children into slavery to raise funds. And it seems that, for the most part, slaves were indigenous Italians. Many slaves were skilled in certain areas – it was not unusual for an accountant or a physician to be a slave. We don't know how Onesimus became a slave, but a slave he was. How did he look at Philemon? Well, our primary clue is that he ran away from him, trying to establish a life for himself apart from the slavery he knew in Philemon's house. We might say that Onesimus looked down at Philemon for his bigotry and cruelty, since Philemon was the slave owner. We tend to defer to those who have higher standing than we do, but then we look down on them. The wealthy, the movie stars, the sports heroes, the business magnates – these folks we often criticize and degrade, imagining we are somehow better, morally, spiritually, or whatever.

There would also have been the likely scenario that Philemon looked down on Onesimus, simply because he was the owner and Onesimus was the slave. Being a master could set up all sorts of reasons for imagining oneself to be above the slave. After all social standing is generally a critical part of one's view of other people, isn't it?

Since he was owned by Philemon, Onesimus would not have responsibility for his own life in Philemon's home in Colossae. We don't know what his tasks were there, though it seems that he may have been responsible for household management, since he was able (as Paul implies) to wrong Philemon in some way, causing him to owe his master something. Philemon seems to have been a reasonable man, and he was a Christian. But that did not change the fact that Onesimus was owned by the master.

As with many slaves, Onesimus seems to have dreamed of escaping from his master – but, lo and behold, he actually pulled it off. He was probably pretty proud of himself for having gotten away with such a change in fortune. But then he encountered Paul, and Paul, who shared the Gospel with anyone who got into earshot, had poured himself into Onesimus' life to the point that Onesimus became a believer. Apparently he had not encountered the Gospel in Philemon's house – or at least his response to that Gospel at that point was to shrug it off, maybe figuring that Philemon was patronizing him.

Onesimus met Paul while the apostle was in prison. I say “met,” though this was probably not the first time they met. Paul had been in Philemon’s home before and may have known Onesimus from that experience in Colossae. We do not know how they ended up finding one another in prison. Did Onesimus search for Paul, sensing a need for spiritual counsel. Were they cell-mates for a time? Whatever the occasion, it seems that Onesimus was freed and yet maintained contact with Paul, as he now considered him his spiritual father. He served Paul in some way during Paul’s ongoing imprisonment. Paul indicates to Philemon in this letter that Onesimus (whose name means “useless”) had, by God’s grace, become “useful” to Paul as well as to Philemon.

Then came the hard part, the hard part for Onesimus, the even harder part (perhaps) for Philemon. Paul came to know Onesimus’ status as a runaway slave, and he knew that Onesimus, as an obedient follower of Jesus, needed to face that reality and deal with it. Onesimus had to reexamine his attitude toward his master. Paul knew Philemon, who was a member of the Christian community in Colossae. So he decided that he needed to send Onesimus back to Philemon. But he knew that Philemon also needed a change of heart with respect to Onesimus. Thus the reason for this letter. Each man needed to revisit his own opinion of the other, especially since they were now both eating and drinking from the Lord’s Table.

What a risk Paul was taking! It was a risk, even putting this letter into the hands of Onesimus. Would he actually carry out this terrifying assignment, not knowing how Philemon might react? It was a risk to put this matter before Philemon, who might still be living with anger and bitterness toward his escaped slave. But at the heart of Paul’s actions lay the confidence that the Spirit of God was at work in these men’s lives – and that He would be triumphant. Paul had known the transforming power of forgiveness in his own life. After all, he had changed from being a persecutor of the church to a messenger for Christ.

Listen to Paul’s compelling words: “I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. [Obviously, Paul had built a blessed relationship with Onesimus.] I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. [It seems pretty obvious what Paul was wanting Philemon to do.] For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother.”

Paul expected that the relationship of faith would totally rearrange the relationship between the master and the slave. So he sends back, not a slave, but a brother in Christ. He continues: “So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand [though usually a scribe wrote for him]: I will repay it – to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.” Possessions take on new significance for those who are brothers and sisters through Jesus Christ. But even more than that, relationships are rewritten according to the Spirit of the living Christ. In what sense did Philemon owe Paul his own self? The most likely sense of this is that Philemon had come to know Jesus under Paul’s teaching, and so his salvation was prompted by the Gospel that Paul proclaimed.

We do not know the final result of the meeting between Philemon and Onesimus. But the very fact that this letter ends up being preserved as one of the letters of the sacred canon seems to indicate that Philemon and Onesimus were reconciled to one another and found a new way to relate to each other. In Paul’s letter to the Colossians, he makes mention of “Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.” This may indicate also that Paul wrote and sent both Colossians and Philemon at the same time from his prison cell (either in Rome or in Ephesus).

If this were the case, one could just about imagine word spreading in Colossae that a new letter from their beloved apostle Paul would be read in worship at the home of Philemon (their usual place of worship) on that particular day. Philemon would have gathered with the other believers in Colossae to hear that letter to the Colossians. And near the end of the letter, Philemon (still smarting from the hurt that he felt from Onesimus' departure) hears the reference to Onesimus (who perhaps had quietly hidden himself until then). Then Onesimus steps up, carries the letter to Philemon and places it into Philemon's hands himself for Philemon to read. It would have been quite a solemn get-together. It is amazing how the Spirit of God works through common, frail, sin-marked people to accomplish His purposes in our lives, isn't it?

In one of the churches where I served, there was a long-time member of the board of elders who was a beloved brother. I wasn't sure just when it happened, or which pastor had taken the chance with Bob, but his life changed dramatically. You see, Bob was a recovering alcoholic, who had come to the Lord at the lowest point of his life. Bob's life was transformed, and he became one of the stalwarts in ministering to hurting people. If the pastor ever came across someone struggling with abuse of alcohol, Bob would take that person under his wing and care for him like a brother. Bob was a faithful and beloved brother, by God's grace for Jesus' sake.

Conclusion: Jesus calls each of us to selfless, sacrificial love of the neighbor, even that neighbor who we may consider to be "beneath us." Who are those folks in your life? Street people, the members of another political party, corrupt leaders, estranged family members, people sitting on the pew across the aisle, actors, liberal politicians, conservative pundits? You know better than I do. Jesus calls you to selfless love for them. Pray for them. Serve them in appropriate ways. Interact with them on a basis of equality rather than one-up-man-ship. And let the Gospel of Jesus, His compassion, His mercy, His forgiveness be the hallmark of your relationships with those around you, whoever they may be. In the strong name of Jesus, AMEN!