

Sermon Proper 18

Year C

[RCL] Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

What is God Calling You to Love?

It's not every day that we read an entire book of the Bible in church. Well, today is no different, but we do come awfully close to reading an entire book from the New Testament.

The book we read, almost in entirety, is Philemon. You may have never heard of it. It only makes an appearance in our calendar of readings once every three years, and that is usually around Labor Day; so if you have missed church that weekend, there is a very good chance you may have never read Philemon. It's a shame because this little book packs a real punch that we, the Church, needs to hear.

First a little background: Philemon is among the shortest books of the Bible. The letters of first, second, and third John are a bit shorter; but Philemon is number four in the shortest book of the Bible category. It is one of the letters of Paul who wrote most of the New Testament.

Philemon is unique among Paul's letters because it is written to an individual. In most of Paul's letters he is writing to a community, a church, like the churches in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, and Philippi. But Philemon is written to an individual, Philemon by name, as it turns out!

So what we have in Philemon, as we have in all of Paul's letters, is one side of a conversation. Paul's letters are a little like overhearing a person's cell phone call: we hear one side, and we can make out the main point of the conversation but we don't know what the other one is saying, and we also don't know why the call was made in the first place.

The letter to Philemon is a mystery, but we can learn a lot with a careful reading. First we see that Paul is writing to someone he knows and loves, Philemon. And not only that, Philemon has a church in his home. This is what the church looked like in the first several generations of the church, believers would gather in house churches. This model of meeting in homes is still practiced widely, especially in places where the church is under oppression and persecution as it was in the Roman Empire.

Since Philemon had a house we might surmise that he was wealthy. As we read along we learn that Philemon actually is quite wealthy because he owned a slave. That slave's name is Onesimus (O-Nee-si-mus). At one point Paul says to Philemon, the slave owner, that he knows that Onesimus is useless to him. That's actually something of a cruel joke because the word for useless in Greek sounds a lot like the name Onesimus. Paul likely might be chiding the Christian Philemon for considering and even calling his slave useless.

How Onesimus, the slave, got to Paul is something of a mystery. Paul says that he is imprisoned for the gospel. This is not a metaphor. Paul was imprisoned many times for preaching the improbable and, at that time, illegal gospel of Jesus Christ.

Historians have supposed three possible scenarios: the first is that Philemon, the Christian slave owner, has sent his slave Onesimus to Paul who is in prison, possibly in Rome. Perhaps Philemon sent greetings or supplies.

Another scenario is that Onesimus escaped from his master Philemon and fled to the bustling metropolis in search of Paul. Under Roman slavery it was possible for a slave to appeal to a friend or relative of a slave owner if the owner was abusing the slave; then the friend could appeal to the better nature, if you will, of the slave owner for the better treatment of the slave.

Finally, Onesimus simply could have escaped for good from his owner. This was perilous of course as slaves were not citizens and had very few rights. The slave owner, Philemon also would have possibly been financially ruined as slaves were quite expensive to acquire - anywhere from 300 to 3,000 denarii at the time, that's somewhere between one year and ten years' worth of wages.

In either scenario, through this letter, we see that Onesimus the slave has made his way to Paul, has apparently been converted to the faith, and now Paul is sending him back to Philemon.

Now, Paul gets a great deal of criticism from people today because he makes no attempt or statement to usurp, disrupt, or otherwise overturn the evil of slavery. In this letter, Paul does not lay out the immorality of Philemon's engagement with the sinful institution of slavery. Why? Some scholars say that Paul, and others in the early church, may not have been able to imagine a world without slavery.

In the ancient world, slavery was so pervasive that everyone either knew a slave, owned slaves, or was a slave. But the ubiquity of a sin does not mean that the sin does not exist, what's going on here?

As we read the letter to Philemon we see that Paul has great affection for Onesimus. He says that he has become his father. It is interesting because it seems that Paul is also something of a spiritual father to Philemon as well. It seems that Paul brought Philemon to faith in Jesus Christ, he says, "I say nothing about your owing me even your own self," which of course is a passive way of saying, "You owe me, you owe me everything because I showed you the path to eternal life." So being the "father" of both Philemon and Onesimus, Paul urges Philemon to receive the returned Onesimus not as a "slave, but more than a slave, as a brother."

Here we see that Paul does in fact level a withering criticism and undermining of slavery. His critique though is not general or abstract, it is personal and relational. Paul is not necessarily trying to overthrow the Roman Empire's slave trade. He's overthrowing slavery for Philemon and Onesimus!

Paul, through the relationships that have been forged through Jesus Christ, is overturning one of the insidious, debased, and pervasive sinful systems of his day. We see in this letter to Philemon three people in a new relationship because of Jesus Christ, a relationship that moves across the insurmountable barrier of slave and master: "receive him not as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother."

We don't know if Philemon obeyed Paul or not. But we have the letter; and that means that the church, in her wisdom, guided by the Holy Spirit, thinks that what it has to say is worthwhile and is descriptive of what a Christian life should look like. It's too bad though that we don't have the next letter from Philemon back to Paul because, as revolutionary as Paul's command to receive Onesimus as a brother was, it's in the doing that is most interesting.

What would that reunion have looked like? "Here comes old 'Useless,'" as Philemon called Onesimus, "Paul has sent him back, but I don't like him! Now I have to love him?!" Or, what if Onesimus had in fact run away? Now Paul has sent him back. What's Onesimus feeling now that he has to return to this slave owner?

Perhaps Philemon is humbled, humiliated and ashamed that his sinfulness in owning another human being has been exposed to Paul. The return, the reconciliation, is the hard part. It is one thing to be loving in the abstract, it's quite another to be put arms, legs, and hands on our love.

So what about you? What is God calling you to love? What injustice are you called to reconcile in actual action? We need to get specific here, because the abstract is a temptation. Abstraction, keeping things general, is a way to keep loving reconciliation at arm's length.

Systemic racism for example is something we all need to overcome through reconciliation. But we don't individually address systemic racism; we find the one small way that we can undermine racism in our own small circle. Yes, fight the systemic sin, but don't let your epic war replace the small ways you can fight in your own small seemingly insignificant way.

This is why the letter to Philemon deserves a wider reading, because it shows how all of us are born into sinful systems, but we can, through Jesus Christ, find the love necessary to reconcile broken relationships, not in the abstract but in the really real lives we each live.

Thank you God for showing us the path of reconciliation; thank you Paul for showing us one way to love; and thank you Philemon and Onesimus for showing us that broken relationships and great evil can be repaired through the love of Jesus Christ.

No go, and do likewise.

Amen.

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