

## *Faith and Freedom*

Philemon

May 30, 2010

There is no longer Jew or Greek,  
there is no longer slave or free,  
there is no longer male and female;  
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

- Paul, the Apostle (Galatians 3.28)

### *The Reading*

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 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, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. (Adapted)

There are four words I would like to leave you with today – four words that form a simple yet significant phrase - and if you remember nothing else from this sermon, please remember these four words, *Everyone matters to God*. I'm not about to leave you, by the way, I'm not about to conclude my sermon, but when I do I want to leave these four words with you, everyone matters to God.

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This affirmation permeates our liturgy for the day. In Psalm 8, which Lisa (Setty, our Children's Pastor) shared earlier with the OPCC Kids, the value of each individual life is affirmed despite its seeming insignificance by comparison with the majesty and grandeur of space. "When I look at your heavens," the psalmist begins, "the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." Everyone, no matter how insignificant they seem, matters to God.

Again, the beautiful song shared with us earlier, *In the Bud there is a Flower*, affirms the potential in all things and everyone. Within all things and everyone there is a song waiting to be sung, even within silence. Within all things and everyone there is a flower waiting to blossom. Here it is again, the same theme, everyone matters to God. To put it bluntly, this song affirms that, "God don't make no junk!"

Finally, our New Testament reading, Paul's letter to Philemon, affirms the dignity and integrity of each individual by taking up the cause of one Onesimus, a slave owned by Philemon. Paul insists that he is no longer a slave, and that it's time for Philemon to recognize that and offer him his freedom. Everyone, even a slave named Onesimus, matters to God.

It seems appropriate to me to reflect on some of the themes that cluster around human dignity and worth – themes like freedom and equality – on Memorial Day Weekend when we honor those who have made significant sacrifices for our freedom. And there is no one better equipped to guide our reflection than Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, and defender of freedom and dignity. We could turn, of course, to that eloquent statement of freedom and equality in Galatians 3.28. I am convinced that no more powerful, eloquent, or succinct statement of freedom and equality among all humankind has ever been penned. It's a remarkable affirmation, and yet I prefer to turn to Philemon, because while Galatians makes an eloquent statement about human freedom and equality, Philemon represents the effort of Paul to live out that conviction.

Eloquent words are a dime a dozen; it's easy for a preacher or a politician to speak eloquently about freedom, to insist upon recognizing equality and extending compassion to all people; but it's another thing altogether to live out such conviction, to give it flesh and blood,

because the blood given might very well be one's own. Paul knew this, yet possessed the integrity of faith to live out this conviction regardless of the consequences. Of this the letter to Philemon is testimony.

The letter to Philemon is unique among Paul's letters in that it is the only letter written to an individual. All the others were written to churches or groups of churches, but this short letter was addressed to an individual named Philemon. Paul writes because it has come to his attention that Onesimus, who has been working with Paul for some time, in truth belongs to Philemon as slave, and Paul writes to secure his freedom.

This much is true; Paul writes to secure the freedom of Onesimus. But it has long been questioned why he doesn't just come right out and tell Philemon to "Let his people go." This he doesn't do. Instead, he talks around the issue, gives plenty of hints and suggestions, and gives Philemon the room he needs to make his own decision. Not that Paul is particularly subtle. Quite the contrary; he is rather transparent in his efforts to sway Philemon, referring to Onesimus as his very heart, and appealing as an old man, and a prisoner for Christ.

However this may be Paul leaves it at that; he refuses to impose a decision on Philemon. He had the authority to do so, you know. Paul was an Apostle of the Faith with influence in wide ranging churches and clusters of churches in his day. He was, in his own words, the preeminent Apostle to the Gentile church, yet he refused to impose a decision on Philemon. I can't help but wonder why.

We might suggest, perhaps, that Paul was timid; sure, he had the authority to order Philemon to free his slave, but he was kind of shy about using that authority. What would happen if for some reason Philemon refused to comply; what would that do to his authority? The only problem with this suggestion is that, from all we know about Paul, it's just plain wrong. There was nothing timid about Paul. When he saw truth, he spoke it; when he felt conviction, he lived it. There was nothing timid about Paul. When he accepted his commission from the Christ, he was gone... he was in completely, lock, stock and barrel ...no, no; nothing timid about this man.

We might suggest, again, that Paul was being pastoral. Every pastor recognizes the tension between being a shepherd and being a prophet; between tending the needs of the

flock, and prodding the flock beyond its comfort zone. Every pastor worth her or his salt feels this tension at some point and asks, "Should I stand up for this issue or should I take care of my people?"

There is never any shortage of crucial and controversial issues. It takes time to unravel their complexity, expose their heart, and live into their solution. And people can get lost along the way. If, that is to say, we try to push and prod people too fast, before they are ready, we run the risk of ignoring their needs. Any pastor worth her or his salt feels the tension between shepherd and prophet; and it's a good tension, really it is. Nevertheless, it doesn't represent Paul's motivation in this instance. Paul had no problem being the prophet; he had no problem pushing people well beyond their comfort zone. If his perception of God's vision, God's mission, God's church countered the express ideas of the church in Jerusalem, which was led by Apostles with stronger claim to the title than his own, Paul stood his ground.

We cannot say that Paul was timid. Nor can we say that Paul was trying to be pastoral. Perhaps we should listen more closely to his words, and let him explain his motivation. If we listen closely, Paul gives us a good sense of what he's trying to do. If we read into the depths of his words we realize that he wants Philemon to experience the same joy, the same freedom that comes when one releases another in love. He doesn't want to command Philemon to release Onesimus. Had he done this, Philemon's attitude toward the man may not have changed. He may have remained a slave in his mind... with Paul to blame for the whole mess. Begrudging and bitter, he certainly would not have been freed from the attitude that made him think he could own another human being in the first place.

You see, Paul desired the liberation not only of Onesimus, but of Philemon as well. Paul knew, as our Jewish brothers and sisters affirm at every Passover celebration, that as long as one person remains enslaved in our world, we all remain enslaved. More importantly, Paul knew that the only reality strong enough to liberate compassion is love. Accordingly, he didn't order Philemon; rather he invited, he urged, he almost begged him; but Paul left the decision to him. Let's face it, to experience the joy that comes when we look into the eyes of another - whatever her or his situation in life, whatever her or his status - and see a beloved child of

God... to experience this joy requires a free act of love. Then, and only then, do we recognize that everyone matters to God.

We stand before the same decision as Philemon in our day, because nobody's twisting our arm to set others free; and yet, as we all know, we make decisions day in and day out about the freedom, equality, and dignity of others. We all know as well that there are several issues floating around in our society right now that are both contentious and polarizing, pitting friend against friend. From the illegal immigration issue that has been stirred up by the legislation passed recently in Arizona, to the bill that's making its way through congress to abolish "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," which since 1996 has required gays and lesbians to serve their military duty incognito; there are issues that divide, confound, and perplex. I would never try to impose on you my perspective on any issue; but I would advise us all to include in our deliberations the simple recognition that everyone matters to God. I would recommend that before making a decision, we remember these four simple words, everyone matters to God. It doesn't matter if it's an illegal immigrant from Mexico or a native born American citizen, they both matter to God. Thus, no decision we make about how to deal with this issue should be based on the easy dismissal of any group as unworthy... they don't count, they don't matter... because they are illegal. Such easy dismissal is nothing but rationalization, at the very least before we make our decision, we should remind ourselves that they matter to God.

Whatever the issue - and there are many - whatever the thorny problems in our families, our faith community, or our society, there are no easy answers ...at least no easy answers that will fulfill the yearning of God's heart for freedom and equality; but there is an approach that we can take in our dealings with everyone; and that is simply to remind ourselves when we reach out to shake another's hand or when we contemplate a decision about someone's future, that everyone matters to God.