

"The Power of Love" (4Sept16)
Philemon 1-21, Luke 14:25-33

Hate your family. Sell your possessions. Choose death. These aren't easy words from Jesus. I adjusted the order of readings not to distract you from them, but to help us hear them in a frame of context. So we're going to explore the little letter to Philemon. The bonus is, in spite of being only one chapter long, it has some of the most power of anything in our Bibles. We'll break it apart as we go.

¹*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...* Already a first break. Paul labels himself a prisoner, and not a prisoner of Roman imperial powers or a prisoner for Christ, but a prisoner of Jesus. With recurring themes of authority and power, Paul immediately begins by claiming a place of weakness, and that somehow our faith confines our options.

¹*Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker...* Okay, two things on those titles for Philemon in the Greek original. First, it's not actually "dear friend" but "beloved." This letter is filled with love, five times in 25 verses, and three more times with our very heart or core emotions. The letter is about a community of mutual love, so this is an important reminder for Philemon right away, that he is loved and therefore may show love. For the term "co-worker," (though I can't keep interrupting for this) it's fun that the actual Greek word for co-worker is "synergizer." The Latin form would be "collaborator." Maybe just some good connections to keep in mind amid this Labor Day weekend.

To Philemon and ²*to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Two notes on this. First, this is a letter to Philemon,

but it's written to be read with the whole church, the congregation gathered together, at that time not in a church building, but in a home. And this was Philemon's home; he hosted the church gathering, which tells us something about his financial and social station.

Next, also notice Paul's greeting of grace and peace. It's a liturgical kind of formula. As we gather in worship, we repeat these refrains of Scripture. They shape and set the tone for our gathering.

In typical letter-writing style, Paul continues from the address to thanksgiving: ⁴*When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.*" A really big detail with this section, which we can't even hear in English. Suddenly the word "you" switches from plural to singular. With this thanksgiving, Paul switches from talking to the whole congregation instead only to addressing Philemon. In English, we can only hear this if we say "y'all" or "yous guys" for the plural.

In a way, that functions well for sermons. See, when I say, for example, "God loves you," it may be that God loves all of you, but you can hear it specifically for you, yourself. On the other hand, you may not prefer it if I called you out and to task, saying you aren't living as a follower of Jesus should. That's exactly what this letter is going to go on to do, though, in addressing Philemon solely and specifically, even though that conversation will happen in the midst of the assembly. Still, for now, it's also good to note that Paul isn't laying down the law but is praising Philemon, for his "love for all the saints" and his "faith toward the Lord Jesus." Even more, Paul thanks God for this love, since this love is produced by God.

The thanksgiving continues, ⁶*I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for*

Christ." I want to pause with this verse because it really aligns the rest of the letter, yet it's difficult; almost every Bible translation goes in a different direction with it or tweaks it their own way. Evangelical versions make the "sharing faith" to be telling others about Jesus. But even in this NRSV, it still tries saying Philemon is going to do something "for Jesus," where really Paul's perspective is that Jesus does things for us, and Philemon's going to do this "because of Jesus."

So let's try a bit different wording. It's got another active energy word in this line. Plus the "sharing" idea is *koinonia* in Greek, the word that gives us fellowship halls and communion tables. It's about participating in the common good. So let's rephrase it as, "how your faithful participation will be energized in knowing all the good among us from Christ." That's still not simple, I know, but it's about Jesus motivating more and more of our actions in community. We'll see when we finally get to the request of the letter what this faithful communion from Jesus is about and what it will mean for Philemon to recognize it in a new, broader way.

Paul concludes the opening thanksgiving and makes the transition to the request in this way: *"⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother."* Here's where the transition hits: *"⁸For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet 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."* Again, Paul downplays himself—I'm old, I'm constrained in this, I'm not trying to boss you around even if I had the authority and chutzpah to, but rather I appeal to the brotherly love you're already used to sharing. He's also making himself weak exactly in order to advocate on

behalf of the weak, giving up his power to identify more fully with someone in need.

So here at last is the ask: *"¹⁰I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment."* Actually the name Onesimus waits until the end in the original. Paul leads up by saying, "I'm appealing for my child whom I have begotten in chains: Onesimus." He first loads on the emphasis of this one who is so dear, so vital, so close to him that he'll call him his own heart, and only then advocates directly in revealing the identity of Onesimus.

Now, Onesimus sounds like a funny name to us, but it's even weirder when you know this name is literally the Greek word for "useful." See, Onesimus was a slave, and slaves didn't get real names but instead were named for a task or quality, like usefulness to their masters. But Paul is going to use this useful name. He continues: *"¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me."* This is where the request gets complicated. Historically, it's presumed that Onesimus was a runaway slave and that somehow he had found or come to Paul. So what is Paul supposed to do with the runaway slave, particularly when he has called the master, Philemon, beloved and cherishes him as a co-worker?

Paul continues boldly, *"¹²I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced."* So Paul is encouraging a good deed from Philemon. Would it be to go easy on Onesimus? Though slavery in Greco-Roman culture wasn't quite like on plantations in the American south, still a captured slave was

legally required to be returned, and then might be punished or even killed. Paul has said he loves Onesimus as a child, as his heart, but is still going to send him back to be useful to Philemon. Will Paul asking for an uncoerced good deed convince Philemon not to do the worst against his slave? Are you sensing a risk for Onesimus?

Well, it's going to get flipped upside-down. Paul declares, ¹⁵*Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever,* ¹⁶*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.* ¹⁷*So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.* Wow. Wow. First, the sidenote that Paul doesn't say this was all part of God's plan that Onesimus ran away or why this dangerous thing happened, but that they can make something good out of it.

And for that—again, with a “wow”—Paul isn't just asking Philemon to go easy on Onesimus, not just to limit the legal punishment as his runaway slave is returned. No. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus not as a slave, but as a brother, or even as if Paul himself were coming. And that's as a partner—again the *Koinonia* word, but here even in a business partner sense. Philemon is asked not to see himself as a master with authority, but to see each other as equals in love. The one who was useless and maybe even met with ill-will instead would be useful as a chance to practice what we preach.

This is what the community of mutual love has to mean, in Paul's view. This is what Jesus does to us and for us. This is the only way for us to understand each other, not only as equally loved in God's eyes, but actually to love each other in that same way. Being part of a Christian community reorganizes all our relationships and

our whole outlook on the world, sometimes with dramatic consequences or financial implications.

This is how we may be hearing some of what Jesus so shockingly declared in our Gospel reading. Our faith has results for how we view each other, how we treat our lives, for what we intend with our possessions. We can't claim more for ourselves at others' expense, so faith really costs us something. And when we're desperate, this community should enter our weakness. It eliminates hierarchy, tending the need or also making us vulnerable in striving on behalf of each other, our heart, our sister and brother, our children, our very life. It was certainly a carefully considered cross to choose for Philemon. And this is the amazing trajectory in front of us when the love of Jesus is our guide.

This is an enormous and beautiful view of the extremely difficult thing that Jesus is working among us when we gather in this faithful communion, to be energized in participating in mutual love. It's no mushy-gushy thing, as Paul himself realizes the ongoing effort and consequences in living on each other's behalf. With the thorny question of what forgiveness does and doesn't forget, Paul knows it may cost him, too, as he says, ¹⁸*If [Onesimus] has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.* ¹⁹*I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.*

That last seems like a bit of a back-handed zinger, so I'd like to consider how Paul addresses this. Since he's talking to Philemon in front of the whole congregation, it could well seem like he's guilt-tripping him. Even as he keeps saying that he's not forcing Philemon to do the right thing, it could feel that he really is. There's some of this that probably fits normally with preaching. If you're like me, there are

times you have some guilty feeling or personal awareness that you've not been doing what you should as a follower of Jesus or practicing what we preach, where you're not all that loving. Then, indeed, it is a call rightfully insisting on a change of behavior.

But it's also amazing that Paul must admit he can't force his Christian ethics on Philemon. He invites him to reflect on what we believe. But even more than that, Paul really seems to trust that this is God's work. Just as in the thanksgiving—that God is to be thanked for the love Philemon had already shown—we can trust that God will work more of it. The God who can bring resurrection out from death and new life out from your way of the cross certainly will undo the chains of slavery and will work fresh beginnings in our relationships. Paul finishes that way in the last verses of the lectionary reading: ²⁰*Yes, brother, let me have this benefit [this "usefulness"!]* *from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.* ²¹*Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say."*

He really does believe it. It takes seriously that faith must be active and ultimately true for our hard situations in life. It is going into the midst of conflict and even of death, but trusting that mutual love will continue and life in Jesus will come through. And Paul rightly knows that his own faith will be refreshed, his heart will be enlivened as Philemon acts in love. That's true now, too, that it's not only what we ourselves ought to do, but how we're energized to love when we witness love, when we know somebody has done the right thing, when we have these glimpses of what God's work can accomplish, that rejuvenates our heart.

The lectionary reading ended there, but since there are only a couple lines left in the letter and since it has some surprising follow-up celebration and ends with sharing blessings,

including for you, you might as well hear it: ²²*One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.* ²³*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you,* ²⁴*and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.* ²⁵*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."* Amen