

Our reading today comes from Philemon and I am going to guess that 99. % of us here have never even heard of this particular book, or if we have heard of it we only remember it from way back in the dark ages when we had to mesmerize all of the books of the New Testament, but we have certainly never read it. Don't feel bad, I am in the 99. % with you and I guess that is why I was intrigued enough to study it for today as I studied I began to understand why scholars disagree on how to interpret this particular passage. The book is actually a letter written by Paul to Philemon about an extremely important matter so let's hear what Paul has to say to Philemon in Philemon 1-1-21.

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

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 and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

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—especially to me but how much more to you, 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, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: 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.

May God bless to our understanding the words we hear today

Will you pray with me please? May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight O Lord. Our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

When you hear or read passages like the one today do you ever wonder what in the world you are supposed to get out of it? Good because I do too! Paul's letters truly were just meant to be private conversations. I am sure when he wrote them he never in a million years expected them to be preserved and read, correctly or incorrectly, thousands of years later. This is different from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John which were meant to be a public record, a collective remembering of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

A letter like this one to Philemon is a little different, it was meant to be read by Philemon and the church in Corinth. we have no back story with it so the words

and intention are open for a lot of interpretation. We don't know the whole story here but there are many things that we do know

Philemon lives in Corinth and is rich enough to own slaves and to have a house large enough for the church to meet in. Other than that we don't know much about him except that Paul thinks very highly of him. Paul wrote this letter between 55 and 61 Common Era, or 55-61 years after the death of Christ. The precise year of letter is less important than the fact that Paul is in prison at the time of writing. We would all understand if he had been apprehensive about his own well-being, but Paul is concerned about Onesimus, a runaway slave who really belongs to Philemon. We have the privilege of listening to this private communication between Paul and Philemon about Onesimus and his status as Philemon's slave.

As 21st Century people it is hard to hear about issues of slavery and even harder to hear that in that time, and in that place, almost anyone could become a slave and about 35% to 40% of the population were indeed enslaved. Many were self-imposed slaves putting themselves into indentured servitude. Ironically, life was so harsh in the Greco-Roman world that being a slave was often the only alternative to starving to death, and there was at least hope of being free one day. But this "life" came with a price because as the property of their masters, slaves were considered animated tools and could be bought and sold at their master's discretion. Slaves were often abused; they could be expelled from the master's house when they were old or sick. Most important for understanding the urgency of Paul's letter to Philemon is the information that a master had the right to kill a slave if he or she ran away. So Paul's letter really was a life or death matter.

Paul is writing this letter on behalf of the slave Onesimus, who did something bad enough that he felt he had to run away from his master Philemon. Paul is urging

Philemon to take Onesimus back, to give him a second chance, to understand that now he is more than he was. We may not get all of the details, but we get this. Paul is attempting to re-negotiate the relationship between two individuals who are bound together in the ministry of Christ.

Bound together in the ministry of Christ... In Paul's mind that changes everything. Bound together in the ministry of Christ, that SHOULD change everything. Think about it. How much would we change, how much would the Christian world change if we understood and lived into the idea that we are bound together in the ministry of Christ. Bound together in the ministry of Christ... THAT, if you will, is our super power, that is how we change the world, and, maybe even more importantly, that is how we change ourselves, that is how we open the door for a new identity, a new identity in Christ.

This letter to Philemon is grounded in an understanding that we live in and for Christ. It is "in Christ" that Paul commands Philemon to "do his duty". This language of "in Christ" is a reminder that it is by the spirit of Christ that we live and are brought into relationship of family with one another. It is because of this family relationship that Paul can dare to "command" Philemon, challenging him as a brother. Paul is offering Philemon a new way to think about Onesimus... as a brother in Christ. Paul's call to Philemon to free Onesimus, "to 'do the right thing' is going to change everything for Philemon and Paul is asking that he do it voluntarily as a spur to the growth of his own faith and as an example to his house church.

How is this going to change everything for Philemon and for the church? Because they are being called to be responsible for and in their faith and their faithfulness.

What Paul is saying to Philemon is to remember who he is as a follower of Jesus and to let that change his life, to let that be his new identity. And that my friends is what we need to hear for ourselves today. To be mindful of our responsibility to our faith and to remember who we are as followers of Jesus because if we are it has to, it will affect the choices that we make and the way that we live. What things do we do today, perhaps without thinking, that keep us from living up to who we are, to living into our new identity in Christ.

I would like to challenge us in the same way that Paul challenged Philemon to figure out how we are empowered by Christ, how we are in and for Christ, how we are bound in the ministry of Christ to live doing what is the right thing to do.

What IS the right thing to do? I don't have an answer for that because it is going to be different for each one of us. It would be nice if doing the right thing was easy, like taking out the garbage, or helping someone cross the street. But it usually isn't because more often than not doing the right thing, as a follower of Jesus involves a radical transformation of relationships: of learning to see people that time and experience have led us to view one way in a completely new way. It means learning to see ourselves in a radical new way, as Christians who can and do make a difference every day in our own lives and in the lives of others because we understand that our new identity, comes when we are truly bound together in the ministry of Christ. Hallelujah, Amen