

Sermon: When Slavery Isn't a Metaphor

Year C, Proper 18

[Jeremiah 18:1-11](#); [Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18](#); [Philemon 1-21](#); [Luke 14:25-33](#)

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Last week we read in Jeremiah how the Israelites did not say, "Where is the LORD who brought us up from the land of Egypt ..." (Jeremiah 2:6). The Bible returns again and again to this theme that we were all slaves in Egypt. We can look at that assertion a few ways. One is that we are all slaves to something. Another is that the story that shapes our identity includes that period as a slave in Egypt so just as we say, "We fought for our independence from Great Britain in 1776" not meaning that we personally fought, we say, "We were slaves in Egypt."

But this letter of Philemon, this shortest book in the Bible, is not about a metaphorical slavery. Onesimus is a slave who has run away from his owner Philemon, who is a leader of a Christian church, probably somewhere around Colossae. Somehow, Onesimus has come in contact with Paul while Paul is in prison. In that contact, Paul has converted Onesimus to Christianity. Paul wrote this letter for Onesimus to bring back to his owner when he returns.

This is the same Paul who said, "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." (Galatians 3:28) Paul is a Christian and Philemon is a Christian and Onesimus is a now a Christian. All three men are one in Christ. And yet one of them, Onesimus, *is* a slave. In the 25 verses of the letter to Philemon, we see Paul navigating reality: the world he lives in does not fit with the way he believes a follower of Jesus Christ is supposed to live.

What is striking about this letter is how personal it is, how intimate. In his work, Paul is constantly struggling for authority. He wasn't one of the people who followed Jesus when he was alive. He was never in the inner circle in Jerusalem. Indeed, Paul persecuted Christians until his conversion. Even after his conversion, Paul is often writing letters to the churches he's founded, trying to get them back on the path he laid out for them, reminding them not to be swayed by the false teachings of the folks who show up after Paul leaves. So Paul often sends greetings from Paul the Apostle of Christ, or something like that.

This letter is sent from Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus. He's not trying to juice up the message in this letter by leaning on his authority within the Christian community. This letter is coming from Paul the man.¹ Paul is not going to command Philemon to do something, he's going to appeal to him on the basis of love (Philemon 9). Indeed Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon (Philemon 12) and the verb "send back" is used when you send a case back to court,² so Paul's acknowledging that Philemon has the power here. He's going to ask for Philemon's consent to do something, so something will happen voluntarily rather than by force or as a fait accompli (Philemon 14). Paul considers Philemon a business partner³ (Philemon 17), someone whom Paul can ask a favor of (Philemon 20). The relationship between the three men means that when

¹ William Barclay, *The Letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon: Revised Edition*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975), 277.

² John Knox, "Philemon: Exegesis," in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), 568.

³ Knox, "Philemon: Exegesis", 570.

Onesimus the slave owes Philemon something that can be repaid in cash, Paul is willing to write a personal IOU⁴ to clear the debt with a clear expectation that Philemon would accept it, even if he never cashed it (Philemon 19). At the end (Philemon 21), Paul does say he's confident of Philemon's obedience,⁵ which would make sense of Paul had some authority over Philemon, even there, he is personal and gentle, not demanding, but saying that knowing Philemon, he'll do more than he's asked. There's even a little joke tucked in here. In verse 11, Paul says, "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me." The name "Onesimus" is the word "useful."⁶

Clearly, the relationship between Paul and Onesimus is personal too. Onesimus has become Paul's child (Philemon 10), the conversion experience has been that intense. Paul has bonded so closely with Onesimus and found him so helpful that he wants to keep working with him (Philemon 13). Paul says he is sending his own heart when he send Onesimus back to Philemon (Philemon 12).

But what, exactly, is Paul asking Philemon to do?⁷ Look at the text. The actual ask is in verses 15 and 16. "Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever,¹⁶ no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord."

Paul wants Philemon to do a good deed voluntarily. What is it? [Free Philemon?, treat him as a brother - can you treat a slave as a brother?] If you were a slave owner in 1840's North Carolina, do you see a call to free the slaves in this text? I don't think so. I think you see a call to treat slaves well and bring them to Christianity. Because if you were meant to free the slave, why would you have him back for ever (Philemon 15). If you meant, "Dear Philemon, please free this slave" aren't there much more straightforward ways of saying that? And if you didn't say, "please free this slave" then how can we know that's what you meant? And if you meant, "Slavery is wrong" aren't there much more straight forward ways of saying that?

So at this point, what do we do with this Bible story? Paul had the opportunity to call for the end of slavery and he didn't. There are many places where what the text says or doesn't say just doesn't fit with our understanding of what Jesus asked us to do: love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. And if we don't throw up our hands and walk away, what do we do with texts like this one, which just seem to fall so far short of the what God and Jesus are asking of us?

Perhaps there is something we're missing. Did Paul understand slavery as something different than we do? In the Roman Empire of the period, slaves were human beings owned by other human beings. They were living tools that did work for their masters. They could be bought and sold. If they had children, their children were slaves. Legally, masters were allowed to beat or brand their slaves, cut off limbs as punishment, even kill them.⁸ And however appalling all that sounds, and it's appalling, remember that when the law says you can inflict certain punishments, it usually means you cannot inflict others. So if that was the permitted list, we can only imagine

⁴ George A. Buttrick, "Philemon: Exposition," in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), 571.

⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991), 144.

⁶ Know, "Philemon Exegesis", 567.

⁷ Martin, 139.

⁸ Barclay, 270.

what people were actually doing that Roman law felt it needed to clarify what was acceptable. Slaves could earn money with their master's permission and eventually buy themselves from their masters.⁹ They could be set free by their masters. Usually a master set a slave free after years of obedient service. When slaves were set free, they still were expected to be obedient to their former masters and could be punished if they were not.¹⁰

There is one difference with slavery in the Roman Empire and in the United States. It was not race based. Greeks could be slaves or Greeks could be free. Jews could be slaves or slave owners. Nubians could be slaves or they could be merchants and traders. But outside of that, the system in Roman was basically the same as the system in the US 1,700 years later. Both economies were dependent on slave labor. Calling for the freedom of slaves was calling for insurrection, one that threatened the social fabric of the entire community.

So there is Paul. In prison. A leader of a small group, easily suppressed, especially by violent means. Is he going to call for insurrection? Maybe that's too much to ask. Let's say Philemon frees Onesimus. He's rewarding the behavior of a slave who ran away. But let's say that's what he does. What happens to the other slaves Philemon owns? What happens to Philemon when the people more powerful than him, undoubtedly slave owners, learn that Philemon has freed slaves who ran away, rather than punishing them. The economic connections that all Romans lived inside of and relied upon would begin to dry up. Maybe Paul can live with that. What happens to Onesimus? He's free. At most he owns what he stands up in. He's a runaway slave, so he's already proven he's not willing to submit to authority. Is anyone else going to hire him to work for them? Paul will hire him, but Paul's in prison. Paul has to rely on others to get the food he needs to survive himself. Is Paul just making Onesimus' life more tenuous if he's really asking Philemon to free Onesimus and send him to live on the few crumbs of charity that Paul doesn't need for his own survival?

It's a mess. But why is it a mess? Because somewhere, somewhen, we got started down a path that said it was ok to not treat another human being as someone beloved, as someone useful. Freeing Onesimus isn't enough if the rest of the relationships that define his life view him as a failed slave, not as a child of God. Paul is asking Philemon to change his relationship with Onesimus, so that they become brothers. Paul is asking Philemon to change his relationship with everyone around him so that this new relationship with Brother Onesimus is another relationship in the web of relationships that sustains Philemon. Paul is actually asking for a far more radical, far more uprooting change than asking Philemon to change Onesimus' legal status from slave to free.¹¹

We freed the slaves in this country. We fought a Civil War over the idea that it is fundamentally not ok to own another human being. But we did not take the next steps. We did not take the steps to change the economic and social systems. We allowed the law to codify systems that made poverty much more difficult to escape for black and brown people. And every time we overturn one rule that keeps us from drinking Cokes together at a lunch counter, we find another just waiting to make it harder for black and brown people to own houses in certain areas or borrow money at reasonable rates. Fine, it may not be ok to own another person. But that is not

⁹ Martin, 136.

¹⁰ Craig Steven De Vos, "Once a slave, always a slave?: slavery, manumission and relational patterns in Paul's letter to Philemon." *Journal For The Study Of The New Testament* 82 (2001), 98.

¹¹ De Vos, 110.

the same as seeing them as a beloved brother, someone fundamentally useful to our community. And that is what Paul is asking Philemon for.

Does that make this text any less challenging? History has shown us, again and again, that it's easier to end slavery than to treat someone as a brother, as useful to the community. So in one sense, no, it doesn't make the text any easier. It probably makes it more difficult. But in another sense it does, because it gives us a way to keep walking with Paul, so we can learn more of what he has to teach. We don't turn away from text because it didn't say what we wanted it to say.

This is such a personal and intimate letter. It's so short and about a really specific and unique situation, this one runaway slave Onesimus whom Paul has met personally. Paul must have written plenty of letters; not all of them got preserved or were worth preserving. How did this one make the cut? How did this one make it through the really contentious process of deciding which letters became part of the Christian Bible and which ones did not. Of all the issues that were contentious during the first few centuries of Christianity when the New Testament was being canonized, slavery was simply not one of them. Slavery didn't become contentious until well into the 1600s. And of all the issues that were in play early on, this letter doesn't support the winning side on any of them because it doesn't mention any of them.

Think about it almost ... mechanically. Paul writes this letter and gives it to Onesimus to deliver. Philemon gets this letter and he doesn't tear it up or throw it away. There can only be one copy of this letter. It's so particular.¹² All the other surviving letters of Paul talk about how to handle particular situations at particular churches, but they're situations that every community of believers can see arising at some point. This one isn't like that. So how does this letter make it into a rural church in the New World 2,000 years after it was written?

First, I think Philemon did as Paul asked, freeing Onesimus and treating him like a brother. Because if he didn't, why not burn the letter? More than that, there is in the historical record, multiple mentions of a Bishop Onesimus who oversaw the churches around Ephesus. That bishop served in the right time period to be the Onesimus of this letter. And Ephesus is the city closest to Colossae. The churches in Ephesus played a key role in standardizing the canon, of deciding what made it into the final version of the Christian Bible.¹³ There is no absolute proof, but it makes sense that a freed slave, formerly useless, but ultimately vital to the Christian movement, included his own particular and unique story in the Christian sacred texts. To him, it had to feel like God was reaching into human history and changing his fate from death to life. We read his story and know that when one person is treated as a beloved brother and useful member of the community, the world changes.

¹² John Knox, "Philemon: Introduction," in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1955), 558.

¹³ Knox, "Philemon: Introduction", 559.