

September 4, 2022
Pentecost 13, Proper 18 C
All Saints', Littleton, NH
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Jeremiah 18:1-22
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17
Philemon 1-21
Luke 14:25-33

Ok, so I've been off for a month without preaching, so you might as well settle in, I've got a lot to say! Pent up preaching!

This morning we get the rare chance to look at a short letter of Paul's. The letter to Philemon is only one chapter and it is interesting that it was included in the canon of scripture, but scholars mostly agree about its authenticity as a letter of Paul's.

What is particularly interesting about this letter is that it is a letter addressed to one person, Philemon, and his little house church, and mostly on a private matter. Paul writes while in prison about his companion, Onesimus, who is a runaway slave of Philemon's. Paul is probably in prison in Ephesus, and Philemon was probably from Colossae (about 195 km). It would have made sense if Onesimus ran away that he would run to a major urban center and try to get lost.

We are not sure of the circumstances of how Onesimus and Paul met, but Onesimus has come to follow Christ through Paul, and Paul has a deep appreciation for his help. Onesimus might be part of the parishioners of the church of Ephesus at this point, who were helping Paul while he was imprisoned. It was usually incumbent on the prisoner to have family and friends bring him food and support while in prison.

Paul's letter to Philemon has some interesting characteristics. Paul is writing the letter to send back with Onesimus and is beseeching Philemon to have pity on him and not to treat him as one could treat a runaway slave. It would have been common and appropriate for Philemon to severely beat Onesimus, or even execute him, and he would have been within common Roman law. Runaway slaves were harshly dealt with under Roman law.

Paul begs Philemon to now treat him as ‘a beloved brother’ in Christ and to charge Paul with anything he owes Philemon. Paul, as a senior person in the church, makes note that he could command Philemon to do this, but instead he appeals to him as a brother and for the love of Christ. And he is also appealing for his return to him to continue to help Paul. Paul uses a cute little play on words in his appeal. Onesimus, in Greek, means ‘useful’. In verse 11 he says, “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.”

There has been much made of this letter regarding a position on slavery. And it is not difficult to see how both sides in our own Civil War could have used it in their arguments. Southerners could make clear that Paul did not take on slavery at all, and was actually returning a slave to his owner. Yet abolitionists would hasten to add that Paul was nearly commanding Philemon to treat him as an equal brother in Christ.

We don’t know exactly what happened, but it is interesting to note that Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, who lived in the era just after Paul and until about the year 108 mentioned a fellow bishop of Ephesus called Onesimus. Could this have been the slave that Paul was writing to Philemon about. Did he go on to lead the church in one of the most influential cities in the East? Eventually Bishop Onesimus was martyred during one of Emperor Trajan’s purges of Christians.

[Pliny the Younger material – letter similar to Paul’s and how he persecuted the Christians. CIII To Sabinianus, Harvard Classics].

For many of us there are times that we have been the runaway slave, and have felt pretty useless. We have wondered who would take us back and how they would take us back. Or maybe we have done something for which we think God will never take us back, or worse, take us back and beat us! Maybe, as in the reading in Jeremiah today, God has us in his hands as a lump of clay on a potter’s wheel, and because of our ‘uselessness’, he is just going to squash us back into a lump of clay because we just refuse to take the shape of a beautiful vase.

So what will we risk to be a follower of Jesus. Will we risk it all and return to God and the path that we are called to – so God can ‘re-form’ us into that beautiful vase. In the gospel lesson this morning Jesus uses this powerful hyperbole: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself,

cannot be my disciple.” This expression of ‘hate’ for one’s family is not how we understand the word today. At the time this was more of a middle-Eastern expression for turning away from, or detaching from something. He is using this statement in the extreme to remind his followers that there is a cost to this discipleship, and that clinging to the things of this world is not the way to the ‘kingdom’ he tells them about. [And next time you run into someone who professes to take the Bible literally, remind them of this verse and ask them if they think Jesus meant it literally, and if not, why not. They will have to confess to not taking it literally and that they also ‘interpret’ the scripture] Will we, with Onesimus, risk ‘going back’, even if it means giving up security and risking enslavement. Oh, how we cling to the things that we think provide us security and happiness and are so unwilling to give up – perhaps it is they who really enslave us!

All four gospels have this from the mouth of Jesus: “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.” (Luke 9:24, Mark 8:35, Mt 10:39, John 12:25). And this is not about living some kind of monastic life of denial; some kind of asceticism that exists for its own sake. Remember, Jesus’ first miracle was at the wedding feast in Cana where he turned water into wine for the celebration. Jesus loved the things of life too and was happy when people enjoyed them. His calling to us is about our attitude toward them. He longed for us to have the perfect freedom as a servant of God!

*This passage in Luke is about a certain way of being in the world that holds things lightly, even people. You say, ‘Well how can I do that when I thought it was about profoundly loving others?’ You can, you really can have this deep abiding love, but without the desire to possess the other. Jesus was inviting people into a ‘way’ of being in the world that actually makes us more free and more loving when we really understand it. Saints and mystics, and lots of average Christians do get this in their life in prayer. There is a peace that passes understanding, a lack of anxiety, and eyes are opened more deeply to the beauty of others and all creation when lived in the wisdom way of Jesus....so when he said, “I have come to give you life, and that more abundantly” (John 10:10), he wasn’t kidding!

In a time of so much tumult and so many threats to our body politic, to our environment, to communicable diseases, to war in Ukraine, and to our wallets, it is easy to fall into despair; but this should not be so for us as

followers of Christ. His teaching constantly reminds us that in this special way of following, we lose our sense of attachment that actually builds despair, and we become bearers of this light to ourselves and others---a hopeful way forward that binds all together and gives us a deep and abiding sense of the unity of all of Creation. But we must practice this way of letting go so we are always stepping into the cosmic stream of the light of Christ. There is a spiritual alchemy that happens when we are faithful in our following and our letting go....Because when I ultimately know how 'useless' it is to cling to the things of life, then I will truly be 'useful' to God and our world, and become more present to that abundant life he was talking about!