

“I Am Onesimus”

September 4th, 2016 ©
16th Sun./Pentecost
Faith Form. Sun./Labor Day

Philemon 1-21

Luke 14:25-33

*From Paul, who is in jail for serving Christ Jesus,
and from Timothy, who is like a brother because of our faith.*

Philemon, you work with us and are very dear to us.

This letter is to you and to the church that meets in your home.

Philemon 1-2^a

Let us pray... O God,

Set us free from prejudice, false hopes, and pointless risks

that we may be ready for what is life-giving as it becomes evident.

May we have empathy for others who are trapped in life

and patience with ourselves as we seek your healing grace.

Amen

Another clue about how Christianity grew...

The Book of Philemon is only one chapter long and

it is one of the letters – or epistles attributed to the Apostle Paul

which are included in the New Testament or Second Testament of the Bible.

Paul had written to a Christian convert named Philemon

who was the host of a house church;

He was a house-holder and also – a slave-owner.

Paul was writing on behalf of Philemon’s slave Onesimus

who had run away and sought to be with Paul as a Christian missionary, too.

Onesimus’ name literally means “useful”,

and Paul uses irony along with wordplay in this courteous

and politically correct letter to convince Philemon to free his slave.

Though ‘useless’ to Philemon, Onesimus would be ‘useful’

to Paul in his missionary work.

Both Philemon and Onesimus were Christians living in a world

where slavery was part of the fabric of society

in the Roman Empire of the First Century CE.

To oppose slavery would have been the same as suggesting rebellion;

And there was already a bad history of this – about 100 years before,

when the Romans experienced a terrifying slave revolt in Italy itself.

In 73 BCE, a slave named Spartacus

led a rebellion that lasted for two years in the form of

a gladiator-trained army, defeating Roman legions in many battles.

They themselves were finally defeated and 6,000 of them were captured, and

crucified along the principal highway to Rome called the Appian Way.

This historical event was retold as a book by Howard Fast

and as a film in 1960 called “Spartacus” with Kirk Douglas in the title role.

Willard, 2

Both the book and the film portray the captured slaves
as being given an alternative to death if they handed over Spartacus
to the Roman authorities.

As Spartacus stands to turn himself in,
two companions stand simultaneously with him and announce,
'I'm Spartacus!'

Then, all 6,000 men stand up, too, calling out,
'I'm Spartacus!'

Though not true to any historical evidence, this scene has struck a chord
for those communities in recent years that have been torn apart by violence.

When we see this phrase, 'I am...' linked with such a community,
it is in solidarity with them as people oppressed by extremism...
'*I am Paris (France), I am Bamako (Mali), We are Humanity*',
'*Je suis Charlie (Hebdo)*', '*I am San Bernadino*', '*I am Orlando*',
'*Je suis Nice*', even '*Je suis épuisé*' – "*I am exhausted*".

<http://www.konbini.com/en/lifestyle/je-suis-epuise-nice-attack/>

These all recall that scene in "Spartacus" of slaves who chose to forfeit their lives
saying, "I am Spartacus"...

This makes me think of other situations – again not limited to institutional slavery,
but every bit as confining of human dignity and potential.

To this list, we could add, 'I am Jewish' in response to antisemitism,

'I am Muslim' in response to threats and actual hate crimes against them,

'I am Mexican' in response to the mixed messages

of cheap labor opportunities and calls for deportation,

'I am Venezuelan' in response to the disregard of that people's economic plight,

'I am Newtown' in response to the unresolved work of gun control,

'I am a police officer' in response to their dangerous position on the front line
of racial conflict,

'I am a woman' in response to the perennial challenge
of women's rights everywhere,

'I am gay' in response to the rejection and bullying against people who are
just trying to be themselves,

'I am Black' in response to racism that still plagues us all...

<http://hackingchristianity.net/2015/11/the-spartacus-moment-for-christian-muslim-relations.html>

Oppression has come in many forms throughout history –

as institutional slavery, it was present in classic civilizations of ancient times
and still is, including the human trafficking of our own time.

Generally, people who have been enslaved have been used to perform menial tasks,
like those of construction workers, 'sweat shop' manufacturing workers,
farm workers, house servants, and as sex objects as well.

Willard, p.3

Slavery in the Roman Empire aided their economy with a cheap source of labor –
not unlike the role of black slaves in the American South
from the 1600s to the 1800s,
or Mexican immigrant farm-workers in our time.
The early Church was vulnerable in the Roman Empire
and was not in a position to effectively change things.

Paul was recognized as a leader in the Church,
but his approach not to insist or ‘order’ Philemon to release Onesimus
is consistent with his declaration in 1st Corinthians 13,
‘Love does not insist on its own way...’
Rather than compulsion, Paul sought to persuade Philemon to do the right thing...
Paul does not attack the institution of slavery – directly,
but in his letter to Philemon, he does challenge it,
and has laid the foundation to challenge such oppression ever since
by the authority of getting people to consider,
“What is the loving thing to do?” and in so doing, ‘overcome evil with good.’

It is no easier to get people to change when they are enslaved to their point of view,
but as Christians, we ourselves have to have the humility to change
when we are confronted with truth.

Jesus challenged his disciples with exaggerated situations to make his point
that we have to be willing to set aside what enslaves us
by taking up our cross, the “cross” of our humility and responsibility.
He didn’t really mean we should hate our family members,
but just to stop being a slave to family ties that become tribal prejudices.
We should not be a slave to a false vision that is simply not supportable –
like realizing in the first place when you can’t build that tower in the first place
when you don’t have the money.
We should not be a slave to a false pride that gets others hurt,
especially like risking the lives of soldiers for a hopeless cause,
when diplomacy could still be tried.

Jesus said we must be willing to give it all up to get something better –
Give up the things that are not working for you in order to receive
wholeness and goals that are life-giving and worth the risk
to break out of the confinements of falsehood and fear.

When we do, we can see a wider world and put ourselves in other peoples’ shoes
and not be afraid to change – in order to grow.

Isn’t that what we come to church for?

Hearing words of hope through prayers and hymns and sermons together,
we renew our vision of that Beloved Community that is possible;
And that the love of God is for each of us and for all people
just as we all face challenges of body, mind, and spirit...

Willard, p.4

In the film "Spartacus", the escaped slaves take refuge on the volcano Mt Vesuvius, which is a metaphor itself for the roiling anger against injustice.

In a relatively peaceful interlude, the slaves are entertained with poetry told by a slave named Antoninus.

I memorized this scene years ago for my own *edification*,
by replaying it over and over again on VHS,
long before there was googling on the internet.

Here's my version of that poem and it goes like this:

"When the sun hangs low in the western sky
and the sea foam sleeps like a maiden at rest,
and twilight touches the face of the wandering Earth,
I turn home.
Through blue shadows and purple woods,
I turn home,
to the mother who bore me, to the father who taught me,
long ago, long ago, long ago...
Alone am I now, lost and alone in a far wide wandering world,
yet still...
When the sun hangs low in the western sky
and the sea foam sleeps like a maiden at rest,
and twilight touches the face of the wandering Earth,
I turn home."

Then Spartacus says,

"I was wrong about you, Poet.
You won't learn to fight. You'll teach us to sing."

Antoninus answers him,

"I came to fight."

And Spartacus says,

"There's a time for fighting and a time for singing.
Now's a time for singing. So, sing, Antoninus."

Spartacus and his wife Varinia walk away together, and she says,

"You like him, don't you?"

Spartacus answers her,

"He wants to fight. Even an animal can learn how to fight.
But to say beautiful words and make people believe them..."

Ah! Isn't this what we come to church for? Isn't that what "liturgy" should mean?

Those 'beautiful words' of prayers, hymns, stories and sermons
can help us see ourselves in others' hopes
for that Beloved Community that can yet be...

Amen

Our lesson from Philemon 1-21 is a subtle appeal to a slave-owner named Philemon to free his slave Onesimus...

- ¹ From Paul, who is in jail for serving Christ Jesus,
and from Timothy, who is like a brother because of our faith.
Philemon, you work with us and are very dear to us.
This letter is to you² and to the church that meets in your home.
It is also to our dear friend Apphia and to Archippus,
who serves the Lord as we do.
- ³ I pray that God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ will be kind to you
and will bless you with peace!
- ⁴ Philemon, each time I mention you in my prayers,
I thank God.
- ⁵ I hear about your faith in our Lord Jesus and about your love
for all of God's people.
- ⁶ As you share your faith with others,
I pray that they may come to know all the blessings Christ has given us.
- ⁷ My friend, your love has made me happy and has greatly encouraged me.
It has also cheered the hearts of God's people.
- ⁸ Christ gives me the courage to tell you what to do.
⁹ But I would rather ask you to do it simply because of love.
Yes, as someone in jail for Christ, ¹⁰ I beg you to help Onesimus!
He is like a son to me because I led him to Christ here in jail.
- ¹¹ Before this, he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me.
¹² Sending Onesimus back to you makes me very sad.
- ¹³ I would like to keep him here with me, where he could take your place
in helping me while I am here in prison for preaching the good news.
- ¹⁴ But I won't do anything unless you agree to it first.
I want your act of kindness to come from your heart,
and not be something you feel forced to do.
- ¹⁵ Perhaps Onesimus was taken from you for a little while
so that you could have him back for good, ¹⁶ but not as a slave.
Onesimus is much more than a slave. To me he is a dear friend,
but to you he is even more, both as a person and as a follower of the Lord.
- ¹⁷ If you consider me a friend because of Christ,
then welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me.
- ¹⁸ If he has cheated you or owes you anything, charge it to my account.
¹⁹ With my own hand I write: I, PAUL, WILL PAY YOU BACK.
But don't forget that you owe me your life.
- ²⁰ My dear friend and follower of Christ our Lord,
please cheer me up by doing this for me.
- ²¹ I am sure you will do all I have asked, and even more.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 14:25-33

²⁵ Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them,

²⁶ “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother
and wife and children and brothers and sisters,
yes, and even his own life,
[they] cannot be my disciple.

²⁷ Whoever does not bear [their] own cross and come after me,
cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower,
does not first sit down and count the cost,
whether he has enough to complete it?

²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish,
all who see it begin to mock him,³⁰ saying,
‘This man began to build, and was not able to finish.’

³¹ Or what king, going to encounter another king in war,
will not sit down first and take counsel
whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him
who comes against him with twenty thousand?

³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off,
he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace.

³³ So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has
cannot be my disciple.