

The Basis of Love
Philemon
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First Central Congregational Church
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For this Easter season our sermon series is based on some of the letters in the New Testament. Much of the New Testament is composed of letters written by faith leaders to congregations. Letters are often intimate, personal sorts of communication. And the letters in the Bible are too. They also speak to the church. The ancient church and the church of today. And in their speaking they teach, encourage, convict, correct, advise, and inspire. What can we learn from them?

We thought we also would use this series to preach from some of the letters we rarely get to in worship. And today is one of those days. Our text is the short letter of Philemon. Hear, now, St. Paul's words to his brother in Christ, Philemon. I'll be reading from an adaptation of the translation by Ted Jennings.

Paul, a prisoner of messiah Jesus, and Timothy the brother;
To Philemon the beloved and our fellow worker,
to Apphia our sister, and Archippus our fellow soldier,
and to your assembly in the house:
generosity to you and peace from God our father and the leader Jesus messiah.
When I remember you in my petitions, I always thank my God,
hearing of the love and loyalty which you have for the leader Jesus and for all the holy ones,
I plead that the sharing of your loyalty may become effective in the acknowledgment of all the good in us for [the] messiah .
I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love,
because the wombs of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

For this reason, though I am bold enough in the messiah to command you what is necessary,
yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of our love—
being only Paul, an old man,
and now also as a prisoner for Jesus messiah.
I am appealing to you concerning Onesimus
to whom I gave birth while in prison.
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 womb, back to you whom I was yearning to keep with me (so that he might help me in your place while in prison for the glad-news).

But I preferred to do nothing without your consent,
in order that your good [deed] might be voluntary and not something obligatory.

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for an hour
so that you might have him eternally,
no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved comrade—
especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the leader [Jesus].

So if you consider me your partner, welcome me by welcoming him.
If he has wronged you in any way, or owes anything,
charge that to my account.
I, Paul, wrote 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 womb in the messiah.
Confident of your heeding, I wrote you,
knowing that you will do even more than I say.

One thing more—prepare a room for me,
for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.
Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Jesus messiah, sends greetings to you,
and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.
The generosity of the leader Jesus messiah be with your spirit.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

So, let me begin by confessing that I have never before preached a sermon on the letter to Philemon. Why have I avoided it over 31 years of preaching? And why have I decided to preach from it today?

Well, Philemon is pretty short, and on the face of it, rather lacking in substance. It doesn't appear to treat any of the major doctrines of the church or any topics of major significance to us.

But the reason for avoiding it is more than that. The Letter to Philemon is a problematic text, for Paul sends a slave back to his slave owner. Which means that this text has a horrific history in the Christian church, particularly in White, Protestant America. For this letter was one of the many Biblical texts that slave owners used to justify that evil, dehumanizing institution.

And, frankly, no attempt to explain how ancient slavery was different from American slavery, or attempts to explain the cultural context of the early church and their need not to appear too politically revolutionary, made me at all interested in preaching from Philemon.

It has been difficult enough to preach from Ephesians and Colossians, letters attributed to Paul, that discuss slaves submitting to their masters. Of course, his authorship of those letters is often disputed, but never for Philemon, which scholars widely accept as authentically written by Paul.

So, Philemon seemed to be one of those text sort of unofficially and quietly excised from the canon.

Then, in September 2017, Professor Ted Jennings came to town. Ted is a retired professor of the Chicago Theological Seminary, one of Katie's profs. He is also well renowned, especially among queer scholars. We and the Metropolitan Community Church of Omaha invited Ted for a weekend of activities, which culminated in a joint worship service here where he preached but also included a Saturday evening dinner and workshop plus a presentation in our First Forum.

I was so thrilled to meet Ted, after having read his books and essays. Of course he turned out to be a very down-to-earth person and great fun to hang out with. Sebastian, Katie, and I took him to the zoo, where he and Sebastian had a grand ole time. If he lived nearby, I think he would have become Grandpa Ted.

So, that Saturday evening when I sat down in the sanctuary of MCC-Omaha to hear Ted's workshop, I was filled with anticipation and then was utterly blown away when he started talking about Philemon. Especially when he said that Philemon is Paul's "attempt to develop what we might call a radical democracy as an expression of messianic politics."

For the next 45 minutes I was mesmerized, as this scholar opened up for me a text I had simply ignored, turning it into something that now seems to be essential. So I have looked forward to my own chance to finally preach from Paul's Letter to Philemon.

How is this text, which slave holders used to justify themselves, actually a paradigm example of radical politics?

Ted began by calling Philemon not a "letter" but a "postcard," because of its brevity. That's a fun image to hold in our minds when reading it.

For Ted the key to interpreting this postcard is the way Paul describes all the people mentioned. You may have noticed that quite a few names were listed in the greeting and the closing and in the body of the text. All of these other Christian disciples are working with Paul or are members of the church that met in Philemon's house.

How does Paul describe them all? Brother, sister, beloved, co-laborer, fellow worker. Every single time the descriptions are egalitarian in meaning. These are people who worked together as equals and partners. This despite their status—whether male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile. Bringing into expression the idea Paul declares in Galatians that in God's reign these distinctions will not and do not exist.

In pointing out that all these varied people are co-laborers with Paul in the work and mission of Jesus, Ted Jennings draws upon the scholarship of French philosopher Alain Badiou. Somehow, despite being a philosopher and someone who has read and researched a great deal in the writing of the apostle Paul, I had missed that a number of European philosophers, mostly radical leftists, have embraced Paul as the origin of radical egalitarianism and radical democracy. So, after Ted pointed that out to me, I read Alain Badiou's book on Paul.

French philosophers sometimes write incomprehensible sentences, but wading through those I was amazed at Badiou's book, which revealed Paul to me in dramatically new ways. Of Paul, Badiou writes, "[His] project is to show that a universal logic of salvation cannot be reconciled with any law." Badiou describes the letters of Paul as "militant documents sent to small groups of the converted."

On this point about a diverse group of disciples being co-workers together, Badiou points out that "All equality is that of belonging together to a work." To have true equality there must be "a shared egalitarian endeavor."

And so the key message for interpreting the postcard to Philemon is that equality is rooted in a shared project, which all can work on together, and all can benefit from. What is that project in Paul's case? It is his mission from God, to share the good news of Jesus Christ, and bring about the salvation of humankind.

Being co-workers in the mission, makes all of these disciples saints. "Holy ones." Those inhabited by God. Ted Jennings draws out the implications of using this word, "To name these quite ordinary people 'saints' or holy ones is to say that each and together they . . . are inhabited by the infinite. Their value is thus not calculable, but incalculable, infinite, and so on." Here is the ground of what in the modern world would become our ideas of inherent humanity dignity and our declaration that all people enjoy basic human rights.

So how should ancient Christians apply these ideas of radical equality in their lives and social situations? Well, the postcard to Philemon addresses that head on by discussing slavery. What does Paul really think about slavery? Especially if he calls slaves "holy ones," sharing in the glory and power of God, of incalculable worth and dignity, co-workers in the mission, beloved brothers and sisters.

I think you are starting to get the idea of what he thinks. In this postcard, his radical vision of social equality subverts slavery and the entire hierarchical, patriarchal system upon which it is built.

But why, then, does he send Onesimus back to his master Philemon?

Notice in verse 8 that Paul first tells Philemon that he could order him to do something. He could stand on his authority and leadership role. After all, Philemon owes Paul his life.

But Paul's not going to order anything. Instead, he hopes Philemon will freely make the right decision on his own. Paul appeals to Philemon's womb. Most English translations translate this as "heart." The idea being that our emotions reside in our heart. But the actual Greek word is best translated as "womb." It is this even more ancient idea that our emotions come from lower down, in the gut and the groin. Plus, womb is a very evocative image for these men. You might be surprised that Paul uses womb language a lot, though most translations cover that up. One of these days I should address that more directly in a sermon or class. But for our purposes today, suffice it to say, that Paul is appealing to the core of Philemon's being and feelings, the source of life and compassion within him, asking him to freely do the right thing.

At the time of writing, maybe Onesimus was an escaped slave, in danger of capture and the violence and evil that could result from that? Under Roman law, if he was absent from his master without approved leave, he could have been crucified. But we really don't know the details or how all these people are connected. Ted Jennings describes it as "Just a tiny glimmer of a complex situation."

Onesimus has come to Paul, maybe seeing in Paul someone who would help him. Onesimus has now been working with Paul, and they've become very close. Paul even describes Onesimus as his child, his own heart or womb. One can hardly imagine more intimate language than this.

Paul sends this man he loves home to Philemon, urging Philemon to freely do the right thing.

And what is that right thing? The action is never clearly stated, but is implied. Philemon should voluntarily send Onesimus back to work with Paul, who is now an old man and a prisoner, in need of the help.

Ted Jennings asks, "What has just happened here?" Are we to imagine that Paul is asking Philemon to legally set Onesimus free? Maybe that's a possibility. Here's what Ted says,

There is nothing here of the manumission of the "slave." Perhaps Onesimus remains, as far as the outside world is concerned, according to the legal order of the empire, a slave. But among us he is both brother (fully equal) and beloved. Here the messianic movement of Paul finds a concrete way of abolishing the separation of slave and free. The reform of the empire was not in question, still less a revolt of slaves. Rather the invention of a new sort of sociality in which these distinctions are overwhelmed. (neither slave nor free). In the messianic reality taking shape in the now time, the messianic time.

Ted was helped in this interpretation by his friendship with Steve Biko, the anti-apartheid activist who was murdered by the South African government. Biko told Ted,

We are not negotiating with the apartheid state for our freedom. Here and now we act as and so become free. They are not to 'give us our freedom.' We are already living free.

So what Paul is putting into practice here is a new social order, based upon radical equality. Where all types and kinds of people work together to fulfill God's mission.

And what motivates them is not law or duty, but feeling, desire, love. We are to act freely from our love for one another.

And to do all of that will subvert the hierarchy, the patriarchy, the exploitative economics.

This postcard became part of the canon, so that it would continue to be a word to the church. What does it say to us today? Surely we do not need to be convinced of the evils of slavery. But does its message of radical equality, of life lived on the basis of love, address any of the social issues of our time? Of course it does.