

A Sermon by Rev. Martha Shiverick
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Fairmount Presbyterian Church
So..., Why is this in the Bible? The Letter of Paul to Philemon
Text: Obadiah 1-21

Have you ever wondered why some things got into the Bible? Some stories are just bizarre like the one about the Prophet Elisha in 2 Kings Chapter 2 verses 23 and 24 where little children make fun of the prophet calling him baldy. Elisha. In his anger, prays to God and curses the children in God's name. God then sends two she-bears out of the woods to maul 42 little boys. Odd story to be put in the Bible and one of the stories on which Shawn Miller asked me to preach when I told him I was preaching on texts not normally used in sermons. No Shawn, ask Pastor Louise for that on in next summer's "You Asked for It" series. I'm not tackling that one! Instead, I thought I would preach on those Minor Prophets and those seldom read epistles that are found in the Bible and see what their message is for us today.

So, would you please take out your pew Bibles and turn to page 151 in the New Testament. This is a little 'cheat sheet' of the Epistles from Paul. On this page there is a list of the Apostle Paul's letters in the Bible with a little description of each one. One the bottom of the page lists this morning's sermon topic, Paul's letter to Philemon. It says Philemon is the only surviving private letter of Paul. That's cool! In it is a plea for Philemon to forgive the runaway slave Onesimus and receive him back as a brother in Christ.

Now, if you would turn to page 215 and listen for God's message as we read The Letter of Paul to Philemon. Listen now for the word of God.

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 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 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 rather I would 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 to both 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 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 you, knowing that you will do more than I say.

One thing more – Prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

Ephaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.
The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Sweet little note. And how fun to have a private letter from Paul as part of our Bible! However, one must ask 'why would the church

retain this simple letter and appeal from Paul to Philemon and then incorporate it into what later was canonized and regarded as sacred scripture?’ It is definitely a personal note, not an Epistle to a Christian Community as his other letters are in the New Testament. And it is to a very personal friend who Paul speaks to with endearment and affection. And, the theme of the letter is so clear and so dear to the ethic of a Christian. As Christians, we see others as brothers and sisters in God’s family. Paul asks his friend Philemon to release a slave Onesimus from punishment and that the slave should not only be forgiven but welcomed into his Christian family as the slave, Onesimus, also is a Christian. Paul reasons with Philemon that he should do this because as Christians we love and care for each other and as Christians we are one.

There is not a parent who has had teenagers in this sanctuary who has not dealt with the problem of the ethic of ‘the everyone’. You know... ‘Dad, can I go to this two day rock concert with my boyfriend? No... NO FAIR! EVERYONE else is. Everyone gets a later curfew, everyone gets to have a larger allowance, everyone gets to wear shorter skirts and pierce all parts of their bodies. And I am sure your response is much like Bo’s and mine has been, and what my mother’s response was to my siblings and myself. There is the one response that goes something about if everyone was going to jump off a bridge and well, you know the rest and then there is the other one. This is the one I was brought up on and the one I used with my kids. Well, everyone else might be doing that, but in our family we do not. And, that is what Paul is saying here to his friend Philemon about being in the Christian family. We are different. Our ethics are different. Our life styles are different.

There is a lot we know from reading just the letter and a lot more we wish we could know. We know that Paul sent the letter from prison but we are not sure which imprisonment of Paul’s it was. Scholars have generally agreed that it most likely was written in the year 61 when Paul was imprisoned in Rome which was his last imprisonment. This would be about the same time Paul wrote the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians. While imprisoned, Paul meets the slave Onesimus who might have been placed in Paul’s jail cell and converted by him into Christianity. We don’t know why Onesimus ran away or if there was another crime he committed before he ran.

There is a Jewish Law in Deuteronomy which states that a slave can seek asylum in the home of a friend at the alter so we don't know if that was the case or whether Onesimus was just imprisoned there with Paul. And why did Paul say he would make up the debt incurred by the slave and that Philemon owed Paul a favor or money which Paul was using in this transaction. Had Onesimus been a thief as well or was Paul speaking to the debt that Philemon incurred because of Onesimus' absence from work? There seems to be so much that we don't know as we begin to look at the letter. It's like hearing only one side of a conversation when someone speaks on their cell phone too loud and you get to fill in the blanks and be creative about the other half of the conversation.

But we do know many things about the letter that can immediately be agreed upon. We do know that it is one of seven epistles of Paul's that are always thought to have been written by him. It is the shortest book in the Bible with only 335 words in its original Greek. We do know that it is a pretty straight forward personal letter (in fact Paul's only personal letter that we have) in which Paul asked Philemon, his friend to forgive and restore his slave. Paul says he is not forcing Philemon to do this through his position in the church but rather he is asking him as a fellow follower of Christ arguing that the ethic of a Christian is to do this. Paul ends his letter by saying that he would be visiting soon. Was this a brilliant way to ensure that Philemon would act on his request right away as there was a threat that Paul was coming to check on him? We will never know for sure if that part of the letter was manipulation on Paul's part.

The central meaning and purpose of the letter is the transforming power of God and how the Gospel can make a difference in the lives and relationships of believers regardless of their social class and other distinctions. When I first read the Epistle as a seminary student, I wanted it to be a letter stating the sinfulness of slavery and a first glance you would think that the topic of freeing and forgiving a slave would make it seem so. But it isn't about racism or the institution of slavery but about the power of the Gospel to transform human relationships and bring about reconciliation.

Martin Luther wrote that this is a masterful and tender illustration of Christian love. He writes, "Paul takes the part of poor Onesimus, and

to the best of his ability, advocates his cause with his master. He acts exactly as if he were himself Onesimus, who had done wrong. Yet he does this not with force or compulsion, as lay within his rights, but empties himself of his rights in order to compel Philemon to waive his rights.”

In other words, if Paul had executed his authority over Philemon in having Onesimus freed, this epistle would probably not have been in the Bible. Instead, Paul uses this to teach what Christian ethics are. As Christians our relationships with others change. We enter into shared fellowship. The letter is filled with family language as all are family in Christ. The usage of the words brother, sister, and child are not coincidental in this epistle. It is a part of Paul’s message.

Large rewards were normally given for the return of a runaway slave, so Paul’s letter was revolutionary in that he not only wanted Onesimus freed but also not arrested or brutally beaten or whipped which would be the usual punishment. Instead Paul uses two arguments to persuade Philemon to accept Onesimus with open arms as a member of his Christian family instead of as a person to be severely punished. First, Paul reminds Philemon that he owes him a favor and then asks him to look at the slave with Christian compassion. He uses words like ‘for love’s sake’ and ‘refresh my heart in Christ by agreeing to this request’ and the he is to ‘receive the slave as he would receive me’. All these point a developed Christian ethics from which to live. The letter is not only about the treatment of a law-breaking slave, but is a witness as to what our life in Christ is to be like. Obviously, living a life in Christ means new relations. A life in Christ means a new ethic and a radical change in how we live.

So, this Epistle from Paul is important and not just a sweet little personal letter to a friend about the treatment of his slave. It is important and is included in the Bible as it speaks to how the members of Christ’s church are to relate to one another and treat one another. Christians are different. They look at the world through eyes of love. They are responsible to each other as they live out their lives as disciples of Christ. And that has timeless and great significance to us now as it did to Philemon and Onesimus in the first century.

And Christians are different. I have a perfect example of this and can use it as my son Asa is safely in New York City and not here. When my son was a freshman in high school he had a huge crush on a girl who was a grade above him. Being a freshman Asa was involved in his confirmation year and would go to Bethany Church with the Confirmation Class on the second Friday of the month. The girl of his affection had heard about his volunteer work and asked if she could go with him as she needed to fulfill her volunteer hours for her school. She did not attend a church or temple and knew or no other opportunities for volunteerism other than to ask her friend 'the preacher's kid'. Well, he was pretty excited that she was coming with him that week and particularly when she told him that the experience made gave her a warm fuzzy feeling. Perhaps things were looking up for him! Unfortunately when he enthusiastically told her about the other volunteer activities that we did as a family and our other donations to charity, she lost that glow. She told him she didn't understand. Why would we give money to others and volunteer hours to organizations when we did not have to for a school requirement. And my son was just as shocked by her as she was by him. She did not see the importance of volunteerism and in doing mission work. Clearly, she did not understand the Christian culture of giving to others and of mission as a reflex of our faith.

And as Paul knew when he wrote to Philemon, being a Christian does make a difference in our lives. It impacts how we respond in our life circumstances and with all those that we meet. We are a people who worship a God of love and forgiveness. We are a people who follow Jesus, who preached sermons on caring for those who are hungry, homeless, needy, and who the rest of our society calls unclean and undeserving. And because we worship this God, we have a different ethic in which we live. We have to learn to see the beauty in the ugly because God does, and the worthiness in what the rest of the world sees as worthless because Jesus does, and seek the justice where others have not even seen a justice issue because we are called to an ethic of love. Paul knew that Onesimus would be taken care of because he appealed to Philemon as a Christian. Philemon would forgive and love, as that the Christian ethic. Paul's letter is the equivalent of wearing a bracelet that says WWJD (what would Jesus do) as he asks Philemon to forgive and take in the run away slave as a member of his family. And that same ethic applies to us in our life

as well. We too are called to act in ways that are contrary to society at large. We are moral agents living within a society that is different. Our faith shapes how we see and act in the world.

So, Paul's letter to Philemon has a message for us in the 21st century. This personal letter and story about a Christian in the first century is also an example of how we Christians are still to live our lives as people with a new and different ethic. We have a very different relationship with others. Our responsibility to God's people changes as we try and live as Jesus did. As Christians, there is no 'they' as 'they' are a part of our family... now, there is only a 'we'. Just as Philemon had to change his ethics as he dealt with others, so must we. All are beloved in our Lord. Amen.

Next week we will look at a book from the Hebrew Testament, the Book of Obadiah. And I have to tell you that on just my first few readings of this Book, I really can't figure out what the God's Good News is for us in that book!