

**Sixteenth Sunday After pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA**

4 August 2016

Philemon 1-21

The lectionary today gives us a wonderful, little letter from Paul to a fellow Christian and co-worker by the name of Philemon. This is an important letter because it gives us a picture of everyday life in First Century Palestine. Most of Paul's letters are written to churches, and even the letters to Timothy and Titus express a rich doctrine, which is meant not just for the recipient alone but for his congregation as well. Philemon, on the other hand, is a personal letter, about a personal matter, meant for the recipient and not for the church. The letter begins as many of Paul's letters do: There is a greeting; a prayer for the one receiving the letter (*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*); a section of praise for the love, faith and compassion of Philemon, who is called by Paul, "*my brother*"; a petition, which is the real purpose of the letter, "*I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment;*" and, finally a farewell, "*Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.*"

In order to fully understand this brief, but significant letter, we must enter into the world of First Century Palestine. According to experts, there were approximately 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. These slaves were black and white; male and female; European, African and Oriental. In fact, there were many Greek slaves under the service of Patrician lords within the empire. The slaves were used for any purpose the owner desired and their treatment varied from master to master. Overall, slaves were fairly treated in the Empire, but for those slaves who ran away the punishment was severe and could lead to death.

Apparently, Onesimus was a runaway slave, and perhaps even a thief, "*If he owes you anything, charge that to my account*". Paul most probably met Onesimus in one of his incarcerations for preaching the Gospel. At some point, Onesimus accepted Christ and became a disciple of Paul. We know, for example that Onesimus is one of two people Paul sent to deliver the famous letter to the Colossians. Paul says at the end of that letter, "*Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother ... he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here*" (*Colossians 4:7-9*). So, if Onesimus is one of the Colossians then he is one of the many Greek slaves in servitude in the Roman Empire.

Now, let us review the reasons for the letter. Paul is “an old man” who is imprisoned at the time of the letter, either in Rome or in Ephesus. We know that many of his trusted disciples are allowed to care for him as Paul tells us in the letter to the Colossians. The letter is written in the year 60 to 61 and is one of Paul’s “Prison Letters.” We know that at some point during his last incarcerations Paul begins to send his beloved disciples back to their home churches to minister among their people. He allows only Luke, “*the beloved physician*” to remain with him (2 Timothy 4:11). Since Onesimus came from Colossae, Paul wants to send him back home to live and minister among his own people. Of course, this poses a great problem: Onesimus could be severely punished, sold to another owner, or even killed. Paul petitions Philemon for clemency, forgiveness, and acceptance of Onesimus as a brother and fellow gospel-worker.

This may be a lot to ask of Philemon according to the customs of the day. The severe punishment of runaway slaves was seen as patriotic by most people of the day. When a runaway slave was captured, the owner was almost always under pressure to make an example out of him, to dissuade other slaves in the household and in the immediate region from escaping. Rumors of the punishment would travel quickly and other slaves would be reminded of what price they too could pay for their rebellion. Accepting Onesimus back, forgiving him, granting him his freedom, and making him a co-worker in the Gospel would require great sacrifice of Philemon who would be in a way encouraging other slaves to escape and who could be incurring the wrath of other slave owners in the area. And here we find one of the hardest principles of Christianity past, present, and future: Forgiveness and reconciliation are always costly and difficult.

Paul knows what position he is placing Philemon under. This is the reason why he appeals so strongly for Philemon to allow this concession: “*I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love.*” Christian love has the ability to transform all of our relationships in radical ways. It is out of love that the slave is welcomed as a free brother, it is out of love that those who have sinned against us are forgiven, it is out of love that reconciliation is possible and the gulf of separation between people who have hurt each other is bridged. It is out of love that compassion and acceptance is possible. Forgiveness is costly, but, Paul knows that forgiveness is the only possible way out of conflict among brothers and sisters who love the Lord and who have chosen to follow Jesus of Nazareth.

We may ask, “Where does Paul get his theology of forgiveness from?” And of course the answer points us back to Jesus of Nazareth and what God did for us on the cross through him. Forgiveness is so costly that it cost God’s Son his

very life. We, like Onesimus, also tend to rebel from God, our Lord and Master. We too are prone to wandering. We don't want to be under his authority and his control. We believe we can do things our own way and that our lives would be better without him. We constantly reject God's acts of love and walk away from his saving ways. Paul would tell us that at some point we were *lost in our sin* and *the penalty for our sin is death*. Yet, God paid the ultimate price for our redemption and our freedom. This is Paul's point in many of his letters. Because we have been forgiven, we must forgive. Because we have been accepted, we must accept others. Because the punishment has been withdrawn and we are now seen, not as runaway rebellious people, but as children of the Most High, we must then show compassion and withdraw our own desire for vengeance and punishment from those who have offended us.

We follow a Messiah who gave his all to save us from judgment. It is for this reason that we must forgive, even when forgiveness is costly. Even when it challenges us at the very core of our beings. Even when the only possible way out is hatred, or a desire for vengeance, we must forgive. This is extremely difficult, my friends. In fact, it is so difficult that for many of us forgiveness is not an event, but a process. I forgive you today and I will choose to continue to forgive you tomorrow and the next day. And, with each day that passes, I forgive you a bit more until the scars don't hurt as much and until healing becomes a possibility. For some this may be a quick process, but for others this may take some time. What's important is that we make the decision to start the forgiveness process this very day.

Now, one final note on Onesimus. Approximately, fifty years after Paul wrote Philemon (Perhaps around the year 117 C.E.) Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, was being taken to Rome to be tried and killed. He was an old man who had been converted to Christianity as a young teenager and who had been a disciple of St. John. Along the way, Ignatius wrote a number of letters rich in theological teachings about the church, the sacraments and the role of bishops. One of these letters was to the church at Ephesus. In it Ignatius extolled their wonderful bishop, whose name was Onesimus. He referred to Onesimus as "one who was formerly useless to them but now he is profitable." It was almost the same language Paul used in [Philemon 1:11](#). It may be that the runaway slave became a bishop in Ephesus. Perhaps this is another reason to forgive. We never know how God will use those people we forgive to advance his kingdom on earth.

May the God who forgave us through the blood of his Son, continue to bless you. Amen!