

Be A...

The Epistle lesson this morning is from the book of Philemon. Now, if you brought your Bible with you this morning... you're probably not Methodist. I know, that's an old and bad joke. But really, if you have a Bible with you today, go ahead and turn to Philemon. And if you don't have a Bible with you, you can bring it up on your phone or iPad or other device. I'll trust you that you're reading Scripture and not playing Candy Crush in worship. And failing that, I bet some of you didn't even notice this, but there are Bibles in just about every pew. If you look under the seat in front of you where you'd put a purse if you were sitting on an airplane, there should be a Bible or two under there, or over on the shelves in the balcony.

Seriously, go ahead. I want everybody in this place to have the Word right in front of them. And I'm also stalling for time while you look for Philemon. It's one of those itty-bitty books that's usually only about a page long. I'll help you cheat though, it's on page 1047 of the pew Bibles, or at least the one I looked at. And in any Bible, it's in the New Testament between the books of Titus and Hebrews.

Everybody got it? There's a reason I'm making a big deal out of this, I promise. Okay.

*Philemon 1-21*

*1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, 2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*4 When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5 because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.*

*6 I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7 I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.*

*8 For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9 yet I would rather 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. 10 I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13 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; 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.*

*15 Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother--especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.*

*20 Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.*

*21 Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.*

Now why did I do that? Make you all grab a Bible? Well, partly because it's a powerful thing to be holding God's Word in your hand in such a tangible way. But as the youth who have done Bible studies with me have probably figured out, I'm making a point. If you've still got it in front of you, look at what we read. That's pretty much the whole book. All we left off were three verses at the end, which should just give you even more a sense that this is a letter.

As a Bible study resource I found called it, the book of Philemon is a "One-Chapter Wonder." And I hope it does leave you wondering. It does me. Because it's character-driven. It's about people. Specific people. This is not letter written to a vague group of people, it's not a long, doctrinal discourse. It's a letter from one specific guy to one other specific guy (and the specific people who surround him), and it's about a third specific guy. And what we know for sure about most of the people here is exactly what's written, no less, no more. So again, I hope it leaves you wondering about them, and I hope simply because it's God's Word that it leaves you in wonder.

I went to a Third Day concert with our youth group here when I was in high school. And Mac Powell, the lead singer, said that night as he said on the recording they made that night (yes, I'm on a Third Day album as one of the 6000 singing, screaming people) ...he told us that he hadn't meant to deceive anyone, but though we'd all thought we were coming to just a concert, he said "we're about to have church up in here." Well, you thought you were coming to church

this morning, but we're about to have Bible study up in here. (As all the English teachers in the room cringe). In fact I chose this passage out of the four lectionary readings for today because we just read and discussed Philemon in our High School Bible Study two Fridays ago, so when I saw it on the GBOD calendar, I thought "God must have been preparing something in here for us if he keeps throwing this book my way." So I hope that as we look at these three long-dead saints this morning that you can identify with one or more of them.

And I'm going to start by talking about Onesimus.

First off, don't you wish your name was Onesimus? I asked the residents at the Benjamin House that question in chapel this week and one of them told me "Yeah, because it sounds like somebody out of *The Matrix*." And he's right. But even better than the fact that it sounds cool, "Onesimus" meant something in Greek. You might have even noticed if you were reading out of a translation that had notes at the bottom, that his name means "useful," which is in fact how Paul cleverly defined him in verse 11, having formerly been useless, but now living up to his name.

I've seen Onesimus categorized and defined in a number of different ways. And a lot of times he gets summed up as this guy who needed a change, or who had been changed. And that is evident here: Paul says *before* he was one way, *now* he's another way, and that change is all about him being in relationship with Christ. He is a believer now. But you don't even have to read between the lines like that to see Paul telling us as he tells Philemon, "This guy, Onesimus, the 'useful one,' I don't even want him to leave me because he's such a help to me." He used to be a slave- and there's a debate on how literally he meant that word, but I'm going to assume he's being blunt here- he was a slave, and though he should be counted as an equal here because he's our brother in Christ, he's really good at being servant. In fact maybe even better at being a servant of God than he was at being a literal servant for men.

Paul basically sends this letter of recommendation back about Onesimus. In fact he sends this letter of rec to a guy who already knows him, so Onesimus must be a really, really powerful witness of what it is to serve. As Paul says "Look, you know this guy, but let me tell you about him anyway. This is the impression he's left on me." As he serves God. By serving the Apostle Paul.

Can you think of anybody like that? We had this intern at Youth World one summer who barely spoke. But we all got to know him through his actions. He was the first one to grab all the

dishes at Bible study and the last one to be standing around washing them, and made sure to go out of his way to hold doors for women and very visibly thought of other people before himself. The intern director was always trying to hook him up with all the girls who came through the Short-Term program and as she'd tell them "He's gonna make somebody such a great husband. He's such a servant." I think she wanted her husband to do a few more of the specific things that this intern did, but the point is that all of us around him saw how this defined him. Selflessness and servanthood defined him in the same way as they did Onesimus.

Now I mentioned Paul basically writing a letter of recommendation here. And that brings us from the subject of this letter-Onesimus- to the recipient: Philemon. Here's a guy who's pastoring a church that meets in his home, part of the wider congregation of Colossae. He's a leader, a guy in charge. As my friend Ruben would say "he's a boss." But Paul is no small deal either, and outside of his encouragements to Philemon his whole letter is pretty much a directive. A suggestion, a request, with the force of a command: that Philemon accept his servant back into his fold.

He says "*if* [Onesimus] has wronged you..." He's not sending this letter on foot from Rome to Colossae in the first century on an "if." A "maybe." He's being polite, but he *knows* that a debt has been incurred. If Onesimus was literally a slave to Philemon, maybe he ran away, and that's how he ended up hanging out with Paul. Like "yeah, I was a slave, but when I became a Christian I liked this whole freedom thing, so I took it literally and I took off. Don't know if I can show my face around Philemon's house again."

Paul commands Philemon to give a second chance to this brother. And he obviously realizes that it's no small request either because even once he's done telling Philemon how wonderful Onesimus is, he basically says he'll cover the debt. He, Paul, will pay him back. He says "I'm writing this with my own hand." Not my secretary, not somebody who speaks for me, me. Myself. I will repay you. It's not going to cost you anything to forgive and accept this person, and in fact you're going to gain a friend, a servant, a Brother in faith. Give him a second chance.

Now it's this whole plea that brings me to the writer of this letter, to Paul himself. I saved him for last because there are some ways I really identify with him, but a lot of ways I could be more like him.

Paul writes this letter from an attitude of humility, but one of self-awareness as well. And that's impressive, because there can be a fine line between self-awareness and arrogance. I spoke a couple weeks ago about how we have to be confident in God rather than being confident in our own limited definition of God- of the box we put him in in our search to understand him.

Well here Paul is, confident of Philemon's obedience because he's almost putting Philemon in his place. He says "I'll pay Onesimus' debt, and I won't even mention how you owe me your very self." "I won't even mention it." Well, clearly he mentioned it, but maybe there were some more details there that we don't know about their history. Maybe he's just saying "Hey, I was a leader to you when you were brought into the faith. That's what you need to be now for someone else."

Because here's the heart of Paul's identity in this book, and in most of his writings. He's a true leader of those around him, investing, pouring into these other believers. He does that over and over in just these few verses, thanking God for Philemon and his flock in Colossae. He praises their love and the good they do for Christ as they share their faith. He encourages Philemon, he makes requests of him as an equal even though he could simply command, and he sends him help that he'd rather just keep for himself.

Paul knows who he is, he knows he's a leader, and yet he still acts selflessly here. There's a quote commonly attributed to C.S. Lewis, although as far as I can tell, it was actually probably Rick Warren who paraphrased it this way: that "[t]rue humility is not thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less."

Paul could be like "hey, guys, pray for me because I'm in prison and it's really boring here and pretty soon they're gonna try me for the third time and behead me." But instead he is positive, he is encouraging, and he is helping these other leaders to find their identity and their joy in Christ.

One more thing about this book. There's a phrase that pops up in these verses twice, which is being a "refresher of the heart." Paul says at the beginning "I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you..." And he comes to a close after making his request of Philemon by saying "let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ."

You're doing great things! I've heard about them. Your congregation has had their hearts refreshed because of your teaching, because of your actions.

There's this YouTube video I saw recently called "Stuff Christians Say." It was kinda funny to have this almost outside perspective on things we say in a community of believers but that might sound strange without context. "We're gonna have some really great fellowship time." "We're seeing some fruit." "I'm wrestling with that." "I'm gonna guard her heart." "Bless your heart." "How's your heart?" There were a surprising number of these turns of phrase about the heart.

But I think that at some of the places I've worked and with different people that I know, if somebody gave me some word of encouragement and I say to them "You know, that just really refreshes my heart." ...to use the words of Paul... I don't think that conveys the same meaning to someone who doesn't find their identity in Christ.

So that's my challenge this morning. Looking for our identity. And as we search for that in Christ, maybe our three friends from the book of Philemon can help us find that identity on a small scale. Who do you need to be today? This week? In your life?

Be an Onesimus. A useful servant. Someone who is so changed by their relationship with Christ that people who already know you might need a letter of recommendation before they'd recognize you. Free.

Be a Philemon. A leader in faith, and a leader in forgiveness. We can easily think of the places where we need to be forgiven, but can probably even more readily identify the people who have wronged us. Who need our forgiveness. Be ready to offer a second chance.

Or be a Paul. Invest. Encourage. Bring along the people around you as you journey literally and figuratively through faith, through what it is God has for you, today, tomorrow, in this room, or to the ends of the earth.

And as your heart is refreshed through Christ, be his instrument to refresh the hearts of his people.

Amen.