

Philemon 1-21 (NRSV)

Salutation

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.

Philemon's Love and Faith

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.

Paul's Plea for Onesimus

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^[f] 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.

Last week, Pastor Joe talked about looking back over years and years of teaching
the same particular passage of scripture. And I spent some time thinking about that
because there are some things that I've taught over and over again.

Every short-term team that I've hosted every spring and summer for nine years,
I've taught John chapter 15. "I am the vine, you are the branches." "Remain in me."
"Those who remain in me will bear much fruit." And I've taught that to the youth group
here and at district events and in interest groups at Conference events.

And next Sunday we'll start confirmation class. It'll be my third time teaching it and my fourth time participating as an adult in that process. The first week's lesson is Creation, Sin, and Redemption. John 1 and Genesis 1. And there's a part of me that approaches it sometimes with an attitude of "I could teach this in my sleep." And yet there's still that amazing process of scripture speaking to us, of God speaking to us through those sometimes super-familiar words, in a way that we might have never experienced them before.

So today I get that experience here in "big church." The first time I ever preached a sermon as in 2007, so nine years ago. Three full cycles through the lectionary. And today is the first time I've gotten to preach on a text that I've preached on a Sunday morning before. And the odds of that being this scripture were actually pretty low, because the entire book of Philemon only appears in the lectionary once. One time in three years.

Now let me back up and give you some context on the lectionary. The lectionary is the set of readings for worship. So if you've ever wondered why the Catholics and the Episcopalians and the Methodists and the Lutherans and the Presbyterians might all have the same scriptures in their bulletins each week, it's because we use this thing called the Revised Common Lectionary. [Now I know Billy knows this, probably better than some preachers in town, because he spends time looking at it. He knows what's going on in the liturgical calendar and matches his music to it]. There are four scriptures for each Sunday. There are some readings for special days like and Easter and Christmas. But for each Sunday during the year, there is an Old Testament lesson that repeats in a 3-year cycle, a New Testament lesson that repeats on a three-year cycle, a Psalter, a responsive reading from the Psalms, which repeats a little more frequently, and then a Gospel lesson, which is why we're on a three-year cycle. We have four Gospels, so during Year A we use Matthew, Year B we use Mark, Year C we use Luke, and during special seasons like Advent and Lent each year we use John.

So in all of that, Philemon shows up only once. The sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time or the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost. And it doesn't always, but it has a tendency to line up with Labor Day weekend. So for those who skip church and go on vacation every Labor Day, they might never have gotten to hear Philemon read in church. I tell you that so that you know you're in for a treat today, and you totally get bragging rights.

So what's this deal with this letter about a guy being told to free a slave? Why is this valuable to us? I think you have to start and take a look at the three main players here.

You have Paul writing this letter, and writing it from prison, most likely in Ephesus. Now prison wasn't a punishment in and of itself back then. You didn't get sentenced to prison. You just got stuck there while they were trying to figure out your sentence. If they would release you, or kill you, or beat you, or fine you, or come up with some other creative punishment. But imprisonment wasn't the punishment. It was this state of waiting and being unsure what the outcome was going to be. So Paul being in this uncertain state should really give us some perspective when he says things like he's received joy and encouragement, and asks Philemon to continue to refresh his heart.

And then you've got Philemon, a leader in the local church, someone whose faith is being praised. And someone who is being asked to do something. In fact he's reminded of his faith because he's being asked to live it out.

And that request is to live out his faith through freeing our third main player here, Onesimus. Onesimus whose name probably ironically means "useful." Onesimus the slave, and runaway slave at that, and possibly even thief- that's hinted at here as Paul says he'll accept the charges for any debt or wrong that Onesimus has incurred. But most importantly Onesimus is a changed guy. He's changed by his relationship with

Paul, and he's changed by the relationship Paul pointed him towards, which is one with Jesus.

Bishop Tom Wright, who is known in academia as N.T. Wright did some videos about the book of Philemon in honor of it being in the lectionary this week. And so I'm going to let him talk to us about this dynamic between Paul and Onesimus.

[video 1, Paul as Spiritual parent w/ Onesimus, his son] 2:31

Bishop Wright talks about Paul seeing "new life" and "faith and hope" in Onesimus. Of love and of possibilities, and these are the same things that Paul talks about seeing in Philemon and in those of the house church to which the letter is addressed. These are the same qualities as possessed by this man and this group that Paul says he remembers in his prayers and for whom he says he thanks God. And Paul says that because of these qualities the "hearts of the saints," that is the other believers around them, their hearts have been refreshed. And Paul himself says that because of this, because of this radical change in them as a people, as a tribe, as a faith community, and because of the effects of their love he himself has received encouragement.

Now Paul has become a spiritual parent to Onesimus. Many of us in this room are here because of the influence on our faith by our own parents. But most of us have some people who have adopted them in faith as well. I think about the adults who mentored me when I was in youth group, and I think about Quito Quest partners that I've had

A group of pastors and laypeople from our district participated in a learning community, a two-year covenant process where we got to grow together, but also to sit under the teaching of some very smart people. For me, one of those people was a guy named

Chris. Chris happens to be a youth pastor in South Carolina, and he's only a couple years older than me, so we have a lot in common. Which made it all the more surprising to realize what a mentor he had become in my life.

One of the things that Chris as my Spiritual Parent talked and taught us about was this hand-in-hand relationship of invitation and challenge. This is an ongoing thing as we live out our faith. We see Jesus offer both an invitation and a challenge throughout scripture, going back to the calling of the Disciples. When Jesus is walking along the shore and he sees the fishermen Simon and Andrew and then James and John, he says to each pair "Come and follow me," and they do. But what do they have to do first? They drop their nets. They drop their nets.

These guys who have given up their theological education and their potential to be rabbis. These guys who are working the family trade, who only know how to fish, they expected to be fishing the rest of their lives, this is their one and only source of income, this is what's comfortable and familiar and safe. And the implication, the challenge underneath Jesus' invitation is "Drop that." Let it all go.

Those first disciples took the invitation. But they took the challenge as well. Not everybody did. The rich young ruler was given that same invitation. "Come and follow me." But for him, it wasn't nets of which he had to let go. It was his wealth. When Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give his money to the poor, he went away sad. He went away sad. That's the difference, and that's the point here.

Accurately or not, we picture those disciples being called and perking right up. Like "Yeah, I want to go be a disciple. I want to follow Jesus around." To have what Paul calls "their hearts refreshed."

They took the invitation. They took the challenge. And their hearts were refreshed. And this is what takes us back to Paul and Philemon. Because Paul, a man who took the invitation and the challenge to follow Jesus is now offering his own and

pointing his spiritual children toward a way of living out their faith. He offers a refreshing of hearts to Philemon and Onesimus and their broken relationship.

[video 2, Paul as a spiritual parent to both Onesimus and Philemon] 2:14

I like Bishop Wright's humor there with that question: "Where did Paul learn that trick?" Because Paul has certainly had Jesus figuratively put his arms out and draw him back into right relationship. First with himself, and with Ananias, and with Peter. All things that Paul would say refreshed his heart. But these were things that changed him also.

Paul is known for writing all of these letters that became the bulk of our New Testament. But he wasn't sitting back passively and teaching theology from a purely academic perspective. He had to live it. And he showed the faith he'd gained through his own spiritual parents by being one himself. He took on new relationships like this one with Onesimus, but he remained a teacher to Philemon despite time and distance between them.