

September 2, 2018

Trepidation and Excitement

Philemon

Back in my school days, there was a sense of trepidation and excitement with going back to school. There was a certain amount of angst about who would be in your class, how much homework there would be, and how you would deal with the obnoxious bullies. But there was also the fun of being back with friends, learning new things, and overcoming new challenges. As you get older, life doesn't revolve around going back to school so much, but new challenges come along all the time: health issues, work problems, family crises. New challenges create trepidation and anticipation ...

The biblical story of Onesimus and Philemon is one of those stories and a new beginning that, on the one hand, is fraught with danger and potential disaster, but on the other hand has to potential for transformation and possibility.

Onesimus

Onesimus is a runaway slave, fleeing from his master in Colossae (modern day Turkey). Runaway slaves could be arrested and imprisoned (at best) or tortured and executed (at worst). After all, in ancient Rome a slave was not a person with human rights; he was a piece of property his master can dispose of as he wishes. He has no rights. Onesimus is running for his life, one step ahead of the executioner. What hope is there? He cannot work. He cannot stop running. He has to beg for food. He lives every moment in fear. Onesimus ends up in Rome. In Rome, he runs into Paul, who is under house arrest. There something Paul says cuts him to the quick and Onesimus hears about Jesus.

When we don't have a relationship with God, it may not be quite as bad as running for your life, one step ahead of the executioner, but it is a desperate life. What hope is there? Ultimately none. Life can seem short, nasty, and painful.

The good news of Jesus is that when we're miserable, God meets us where we are. Paul is the one who taught that, "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus*" (Romans 3:23-24) and "*at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:6-8).

Onesimus has experienced this forgiveness from God through the death of Jesus, and the transformation that begins through the Holy Spirit, to the point that Paul describes him as "*our faithful and dear brother*" (Colossians 4:9). Onesimus' life is transformed

from hopelessness and despair to having dignity, friendship, and purpose. Paul is sending him back to his former master, Philemon, saying, *"I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel"* (Philemon 10-13).

Onesimus is, to quote Paul, a whole new person. He writes, *"If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"* (2 Corinthians 5:17). He is changed from a thieving, absconding, useless slave into a useful servant of God.

Philemon

Philemon is a wealthy man. Onesimus, his slave, has run away and is now returning. How should he react? Legally he should have Onesimus brutally beaten or killed. Philemon would be justified in being very angry with Onesimus (to say the least); we might feel it appropriate to severely discipline the wretch and give him the worst of all possible jobs. After all, you don't want to send out the message to your other slaves, that you can run away and just come back like nothing happened. Or, even worse, be rewarded for your sins, as Paul seems to suggest.

There are times when anger seems justified. When we lived in an apartment Halifax, we had a neighbour whose bass from his stereo would pound through the night. I could feel quite justified pounding on the living room wall at three in the morning when I just can't sleep because of the constant BOOM-BOOM-BOOM. When the boss fails to appreciate my hard work – or takes credit for my hard work – I can feel quite justified in tearing her down. When my child is purposely disobedient, I can feel it only reasonable to give him a piece of my mind.

The only problem is, these styles of relating to people don't accomplish anything good. In the long run, they are self-destructive behaviours ... after the first flush of "Boy, that felt good!" repairing the damage done means the only one who really suffers is me.

Paul is asking Philemon to think about a new relationship with Onesimus: *"Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.*

"So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask" (Philemon 15-21). It's about forgiveness. It's about mercy. It's

about a new beginning. This kind of forgiveness can only be inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit (it's not "normal" – not back then, not now!):

Paul urges Philemon to treat Onesimus as *"no longer a slave but a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you ... welcome him as you would welcome me"* (v.16-17). Paul is asking Philemon to welcome Onesimus as the Father welcomes home the prodigal son in Jesus' parable (Luke 15:11-32).

These are real people, in a very real, stressful – potentially life-and-death – situation, yet they are not pounding on the wall, cutting other people down, or reacting in anger. Paul emphasizes there is a distinctly Christ-like way to handle relationships: a way built on grace and love, modelling forgiveness and compassion, building people up rather than tearing them down. Could I ever do that?

Think about Jesus. Jesus' way of relating to people is to offer forgiveness (not judgement), **then** invite them to change. When Jewish men bring a woman caught in adultery before Jesus, He says, *"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." ... those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus asked her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' 'No one, sir,' she said. 'Then neither do I condemn you,' Jesus declared."* This is Jesus' model of mercy. Then, after showing forgiveness, He adds, *"Go now and leave your life of sin"* (John 8:1-11).

Jesus challenges us to relate to people in love, not for what they are now, but for who they might and can be in Christ. In practical terms I need to ask, how can I forgive? How can I encourage this person as who God created them to be not as they are? How can I relate to them someone who is so precious to God that Jesus died for them?

Us

Living this way does not come naturally – it is a gift of the Spirit.

1. **We need to know Jesus** as our Saviour who loves and empowers us. God's love for us is not clouded by our sins, destroyed by our indifference, or taken away by our failure. We have a Father who loves us no matter where we wander or what we do. Nothing and no one can ever separate us from the love of God (Romans 8). Can we accept God loves every other person just as much?
2. **We need to know we are all prodigals**; none of us is perfect. But each of us is also someone the Father welcomes home. And forgives. We can be free to be ourselves – to try, succeed, and fail – secure in the love of God. God made each of us with a unique mix of skills, talents, abilities, gifts, personality traits, etc. The only person we have to "please" is God – not our peers, children, or parents. We don't have to try to fit in to others' expectations; we can dare to be different as we are

honest to who God made us to be. Onesimus “blossoms” into who he really is “in Christ” – a gifted, talented helper who is a better servant/slave than ever before!

3. **We need the Holy Spirit** actively working in our lives. We don't have to be self-made superheroes. (we cannot be self-made superheroes). The Spirit is the One who transforms Onesimus from a useless runaway to an incredibly helpful servant and friend. The Spirit will change Philemon's heart. The Spirit can help us be all we can be too!
4. **We need to understand and appreciate the cost:** sending Onesimus back cost Paul a helper (13) and potentially a substantial sum of money (18-19). Onesimus' return would cost Philemon pride (8-9, 14) and wages (21). Onesimus was taking the risk of losing his new-found freedom ... or his life! What might it cost us to love as Jesus loved? To forgive as Jesus forgave? To seek to speak and act in the name of Jesus (Colossians 3:15-17). The peace that comes is worth it.
5. **We need to choose to love and forgive.** Love and forgiveness are fundamentally acts of the will. When we choose to love and forgive someone, even if we don't “feel” like it, we discover, our loves grows, deepens, and blossoms. That kind of love builds relationships that are deep and satisfying. That kind of love and forgiveness also blesses us with a clear conscience and a pure heart before God.

Paul is inviting us all to the potential and possibility of a new way of living with Jesus, a new way of being. To Philemon and the church in Colossae, he writes, *“As God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity”* (Colossians 3:12-14). Think of what a community would be like that, individually and as a group, actually puts that counsel into practice? Think of what people, checking out church this September, would think if they find us to be that kind of church? Be aware of new people this Fall, and extend grace and love to them, in the name of Jesus.

Will you take up the Onesimus-Philemon challenge? There is always some trepidation and anticipation when we are called to consider a new beginning. But choosing to get out of your comfortable rut and make a change – to forgive, to love, to sacrifice – is always worth the risk. Will you bear with each other and forgive one another, forgiving as the Lord forgave you? Will you clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience? And over all these virtues, will you put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity?

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