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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale*

*September 4, 2022*

*Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Deut. 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33*

Today you've already met Jeremiah and his father Glen, but there are two other people I'd like you to meet this morning whom you probably don't know very well, or perhaps have never even heard of. That's because their names only come up every three years in our lectionary, and even then, we don't usually talk about them in church. The two people are Philemon and Onesimus, the slave owner and the slave that you heard about in our second reading today from the book of Philemon.

Philemon is the shortest book in the Bible—it's only 1 chapter long and contains only 25 verses (we heard 21 of them today), but in those verses are powerful words from the apostle Paul about life and death matters, and in this book, in these characters of Philemon and Onesimus, we can actually find ourselves—so it makes sense that we spend some time getting to know them.

The book of Philemon is a personal letter that the apostle Paul wrote to his dear friend co-worker in the gospel, as he calls him, Philemon. It's clear from the letter that Philemon led a house church in early Christian times with Apphia—a woman leader in the church—and Archippus, a fellow soldier. It's also clear that Paul had a deep reverence and respect for Philemon. Paul writes, "When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus."

And then Paul says, "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 had a lot of time to think and to write this letter to Philemon, because at the time that Paul was writing, he was imprisoned, likely with Timothy, a ministry companion on some of his later journeys. As Jeremiah has taught us, the thoughtfulness of what comes from your pen (or today, from the

keyboard) while in prison has a powerful effect on those who receive the letter.

That's what Paul was hoping from his letter. He hoped that he would have an effect on Philemon to change his heart about his slave, Onesimus.

You see, it's likely that Onesimus, the slave, had run away from Philemon, his master. Slavery was quite common in the ancient Greco-Roman world, in fact it may have been that about 35-40% of the population was indeed enslaved. We don't know exactly why Onesimus ran away, but what we do know is that slaves were often abused and could be bought or sold at their master's discretion—just like they shamefully were in our own country. And, like what also tragically happened in our own country, when a slave ran away, they could be killed by their master.

Somehow Paul had formed a relationship with Onesimus while he was in prison. Paul tells Philemon in his letter that during his imprisonment he has become like a father to Onesimus, and Onesimus has been useful to him. And not only that, Onesimus has even become his own heart.

He is asking Philemon out of love to do a good deed...one that Paul could have been bold enough in Christ to command him to do, but instead Paul is appealing to him on the basis of love. Paul asks Philemon, "so if you consider me as your partner, welcome him, as you would welcome me," "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother."

Think about what an enormous change of mind Paul is asking Philemon to have...instead of killing his slave who has run away from him, Paul is asking Philemon to accept him as a brother, and to release him from any debt which Paul himself will pay. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back as an equal. "Confident of your obedience," Paul says, "I am writing you, knowing that you will do even more than I can say."

I am wondering if we all have a little bit of Philemon in us. It's hard to have such a tremendous change of mind and heart that it would cause us to think or to do completely the opposite of what we're conditioned to know or to do, like Philemon accepting Onesimus as a brother and not as a slave who has run away whom he has the right to kill. And yet, such a tremendous change of mind and heart is what the Christian life often demands. Jesus is clear in the gospel today that following him means changing our primary

allegiance—from father and mother, wife, and children, brothers and sister—to Jesus. For when we love our life more than we love Jesus, we are not truly a disciple of Jesus. And when we hold on to our possessions more tightly than we hold on to Jesus, we are not truly a disciple of Jesus.

Jesus is clear that being his disciple, having our primary allegiance to Jesus, means thinking differently than we are conditioned by society to think. It includes welcoming those who have been marginalized, enslaved or imprisoned – those whom society would treat as scary or less than or not worthy. It means welcoming and treating Jeremiah as an equal, as a beloved brother in Christ.

We don't know what happened after Philemon read the letter Paul sent him. Though I hope he did fully welcome and accept Onesimus as his equal, I imagine it wasn't easy for him to change his heart, to change what he had believed and done for so long. That's why I imagine we all have a little bit of Philemon in us.

But I also imagine we have a little bit of Onesimus in us, too. For many reasons, we may have wandered away from our “master,” from God. We might be fearful of God's judgment and whether we are welcomed, forgiven, and loved by God. We wonder if we will be seen as scary, or less than, or not worthy.

And so this is when we get to trust that what Paul says is true: we have *grace* and *peace* from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This is when we trust what we say in the Apostle's Creed: that we believe in the forgiveness of sins. This is when we trust that there is nothing—nothing—that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

And when we experience that kind of grace, it changes us. When we truly believe that we are covered by grace we in turn cover others with grace. If Philemon truly believed and experienced God's grace, he could do no other than extend that grace to Onesimus. And the same is true for us:

We are loved by God, so we can love. We are welcomed by God, so we can welcome. We are forgiven by God, so we can forgive. We are blessed by God, so that we can be a blessing. God's love can change your heart, because you reside in the heart of God. And what wondrous love is this. Amen.