

Sermon for Sunday, September 8, 2013 Philemon 1-21, Luke 14:25-33 "Because of Love"

It's a rare thing that we read an entire Epistle on a given Sunday, but that is exactly what we do this morning, in this reading that is the entire letter of the apostle Paul to Philemon. It's an odd letter. Philemon is a friend and a fellow worker in bringing the Word of God to people. He has a house church in Colossae. Paul starts out by saying all sorts of complimentary things to Philemon, what Martin Luther called "holy flattery," and then...

...and then, as you might guess with such a flowery start to the letter, he has a wee little request to make.

You need to know a couple of things before we go any further.

First, Paul is an old man when he writes this letter.

Second, he is writing this letter from prison.

Imagine a beat up old guy, who has been worn down by his labors and his travels, now –once again – tossed into jail by saying the wrong thing (BOLDLY) to the wrong people (BOLDLY). Scholars disagree as to whether he is imprisoned in Rome or Ephesus, but everyone agrees that he is in jail. And suddenly, while he is sitting there in his jail cell, someone shows up and says "Paul, I'm here to help you."

This is surprising on two levels. First of all, it is Philemon's servant, Onesimus. He is a slave. Did Philemon send him? No, he ran away.

Second of all, he is offering to make himself useful to Paul. That's what Onesimus' name means: "useful," but in fact Paul mentions the fact that Onesimus has something of a reputation of being utterly useless.

Now remember, Paul is an old man, sort of tired and beat up. It would be a lovely thing if he had someone who could go get him things that would be a comfort to him while he was in jail. But he also knows that Onesimus has run away from Philemon.

Paul has a choice to make: keep Onesimus with him, because he could use someone to help him, or send him back to his most-likely angry master.

Now, once again, let's take a little break from the story for some digging about Onesimus.

Traditionally, this is viewed as Paul sending a runaway slave back to his owner, and it was a passage in Scripture that was used for centuries as an endorsement of slavery, right up through the Civil War, but it's a little more complicated than that.

Paul calls Onesimus a slave, but it is not entirely clear from the words of the text whether he is still a slave and a runaway, in which case Paul would be obliged by Roman law to return him, or whether he has been released by Philemon because he is so useless and somehow he has turned up at Paul's jail cell door. Some of the early church fathers like Origen don't speak at all about whether Onesimus was a slave or not. They don't view it as a critical part of the story, and many modern scholars don't, either.

That's because when Paul writes to Philemon, he doesn't say, "I'm sending your fugitive slave back to you according to Roman law." No, he says something like "It sounds like you and Onesimus weren't treating each other like Christians should. I'm sending him back so that you two can reconcile and so that you and he might be beloved brothers. If he owes you anything, I'll pay it. Just be reconciled. I am asking this on the basis of love."

On the basis of love. Not justice. Not economics. Not legality. Simply love. This from this old man in a jail cell who could really use a hand, but who sees reconciliation as more important than his temporal needs.

How do we get to the place where we put reconciliation on the basis of love in front of justice or economic benefit or following the conventional rules?

Jesus does it all the time. He does it once again, in a startling bit of preaching, in today's gospel. He says "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple... none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

On the face of it, this doesn't sound like reconciliation on the basis of love, all this talk of hate. But let's think a little deeper. What Jesus is challenging the crowd to do, just as Paul is challenging Philemon to do, is to step away from the conventional rules, the status quo. He is saying "let go of loyalty to family or tribe, let go of the desire to be judged successful in the world's terms, let go of the desire for money and possessions. Let go of all of that if you want to follow me." What happens when Jesus' followers do that? The world doesn't understand, but it frees Jesus' followers to see everyone, not just their biological kin, as their fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters. Everyone is equally valuable, and therefore worthy of reconciliation after the battles of the past. If Philemon can see Onesimus as a brother in Christ, in love, rather than a useless bothersome guy who ran away, reconciliation can happen. If the nameless follower of Jesus in that crowd can see the nasty neighbor who wronged his father in a land transaction as a brother in Christ, in love, reconciliation can happen.

Paul echoes Jesus: relationship is not a mere matter of biological connection, it is about being a part of the Body of Christ together.

Easier said than done, you say. Do the victims of Bernie Madoff's financial malfeasance have to love him as a brother? It's hard, but yes, even as they hate his deeds. Does the brother of a soldier killed in Helmand have to love the maker of the IED that caused his death? It's hard, but yes, even as he curses the war and the actions of that man. Otherwise, we are lost forever in a spiral of identifying someone as bad and us as good, even as others do the same thing to us.

Paul asks Philemon to do a hard thing – to reconcile with someone who wronged him in some way. It is hard for Onesimus, too. He has got to be frightened about what will happen when he returns to Colossae, bearing this letter.

Jesus asks us to do a hard thing in the same way. We are to see everyone as beloved to us as our own precious family, and to forgive them with the same grace as we would offer to our own mother or father or sister or brother or child.

Do we know what happened in the end when Onesimus returned? No, we hear nothing further. But I hope Philemon embraces him. I hope they forgive each other whatever is necessary to forgive. Not because Paul commanded it, because he did not. Not because the law was satisfied, because it was not. Not because it made economic sense, because it did not. Simply because of love.

Amen.