

Sermon for 5 September 2010
15 Pentecost; Proper 18, Year C

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The readings appointed for this morning offer a grab bag, as it were, of challenging themes, from the Moses' ultimatum to the children of Israel to Jesus' discomfoting words regarding the sacrifices inherent in following the Gospel. There is much unpacking and explanation that should be done for both of these readings, but perhaps another time. I want, instead, to focus on the Epistle, Paul's letter to Philemon. I feel compelled to focus on the Epistle, if for no other reason than because this is the only Sunday in the entire three year lectionary that we read from this little, relatively obscure book in the New Testament. The book is only twenty-five verses long, and we read twenty-one of them this morning, and we won't hear them in church again until 2013. So, here's our one shot at Philemon.

All of Paul's Epistles can be called "occasional" in the sense that each of his letters is written to address a particular concern of a local church or of an individual. We're fortunate that much of the situation which gives rise to the letter to Philemon can be inferred from the text.

Paul opens the letter with a little bit of what one biblical scholar called "holy flattery" in which Paul praises Philemon's faithfulness. In other words, Paul butters Philemon up. He knows that his request will be unpopular, and yet he is confident enough in its appropriateness to claim his Apostolic authority, should Philemon refuse to take the recommendation. "Accordingly," he writes, "though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you." Like a parent, Paul wants Philemon to do the right thing *because* it's the right thing to do, but he'll force the issue if it's important enough.

Finally, Paul gets to his request. He has run into this character Onesimus, or rather Onesimus sought Paul out, the Apostle being imprisoned at the time and not likely to come upon someone by chance. This Onesimus was Philemon's slave and had run away. The precise events surrounding Onesimus' escape is unclear, but what is clear is that the runaway slave is frightened of his master's response should he return.

Indeed, Onesimus had reason to be frightened. According to Roman Law, a master could do just about anything he wished to a slave, and typically, a runaway slave, upon being returned would be branded on the forehead and would often be forced to fight with beasts to the death. Slave and master would be brought back together, reconciled in a sense, but without any sense of equality.

But Paul pushes reconciliation on Christian terms, which is to say that real reconciliation is effected between men and women whom God has created

equal, and the terms of Christian relationship is fraternal rather than hierarchical. Hierarchies exist (between employer and employee, between parent and child, and so forth), and those hierarchies exist for the common good; but getting beyond the practical, often necessary distinctions which serve to make society function, on the deepest level the relationship between Christians *as Christians* is that of brotherhood and sisterhood.

Philemon should have known this, because he had surely heard it before. He had surely heard Paul's radical reenvisioning of Christian relationships, because our equality under Christ was so central to Paul's message and because Paul and Philemon were apparently so close. In all events, Philemon was about to hear that message again, not just in this private letter, but read out in the local church, which met in his own home.

Without getting into too much biblical scholarship, we know that Philemon and his

household lived in Colossae, because so many of the people whom Paul mentions in his Epistle to the Colossians are also mentioned in the Epistle to Philemon, including Onesimus himself, who is called "one of yourselves" in Colossians. In fact, the original copy of the Epistle to the Colossians, as we learn in the text of that letter, was delivered by Onesimus, probably also carrying the Epistle to Philemon. Whereas today's reading was a private letter encouraging Philemon to do the right thing, the Epistle to the Colossians would have been read publicly in the church. And what does that letter say?:

Here there cannot be Greek and Jew,
circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian,
Scyth'ian, slave, free man, but Christ is
all, and in all.

What is Paul doing here? Perhaps he's hedging his bets. If the private letter doesn't convince Philemon to have mercy on Onesimus, perhaps the same message read out to the whole Christian community will force his charity in the matter.

Tragically, considering the sad history of slavery over the following two millennia, Paul never explicitly demands manumission of Onesimus or abolition of slavery more generally. Nineteenth century Anglican biblical scholar J.B. Lightfoot wrote, "the word emancipation seems to be trembling on his lips, and yet he does not once utter it." Paul does, however, hint at it in the last verse of this morning's Epistle:

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

In all events, either because of the private letter to Philemon or the public letter to the Colossians, we know that Onesimus was made free. Ignatius of Antioch informs us that Onesimus went on to be Bishop of Ephesus, and the Apostolic Constitutions tell us that Onesimus and Philemon died together as friends, free men, and martyrs during Nero's persecution of the Christians.

At its heart, the Epistle to Philemon is a challenge to all of us still. Certainly, the days of slavery are happily over in the land, but we still build walls between us for the sake of power or propriety. We still have a hard time creating relationships of genuine love as brothers and sisters, because we still see divisions which do not exist in the mind of God: divisions of race or class or power. We still permit our authority to distance us from those in our charge, or lack of power to scare us from building relationships with those we see as being "above us." But if a slave and master in first century Greece can be reconciled, can become equals, can die together for the sake of their Lord, then our divisions can cease, too. May God do it, and may we be ready. Amen.