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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 18 (Pentecost 13), Series C
Saturday, September 7th, 2019
Sunday, September 8th, 2019

Sermon: Loving Persuasion

Text: Philemon

Focus: Jesus bore the blame and suffered the shame of our sin on our behalf.

Function: That they would act in love, not according to their rights, towards others.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “I believe that Jesus Christ, my Lord..., has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me...” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phm. 3)

Amen. Today’s epistle is a little letter that packs quite a punch. The apostle Paul’s letter to Philemon is so short that it can be read as a single pericope. This oft overlooked letter is typically studied only for its fine example, in outline form, of the literary structure of Paul’s epistles. Yet I believe Philemon offers us one of the finest examples of the power of love to persuade people of your point of view. Rather than the idea that “might makes right,” even the might of a majority vote, Paul shows us that an appeal to love is the superior way to win someone over to your cause.

So here’s the situation: Paul is in prison (probably in Rome) for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. While in prison, he somehow meets Onesimus, a runaway slave who *just happens* to belong to another friend of Paul’s, named Philemon, from the city of Colossae. It’s hard to be certain, but Onesimus may have stolen some of Philemon’s property before going on the lam (cp. vv. 18-19). Of course, nothing happens by mere coincidence. God made a divine appointment for Onesimus to meet Paul so he could hear the Gospel and believe in Jesus.

Onesimus, now a Christian, recognizes his error and repents of his sin. Paul is sending him back to Philemon with three letters in hand: the Epistle to the Ephesians, the Epistle to the

Colossians, and this personal dispatch for Philemon himself. Paul knows that Onesimus is risking his very *life* by returning to his master. Under Greek and Roman law, slaves had absolutely no rights. They were “property” to be disposed of at their master’s will. If Philemon wanted to sell, beat, torture, or *even kill* Onesimus for his bad behavior, he was within his rights under the law.

But Paul loves both Philemon and Onesimus too much to let that happen. So he writes this letter as a way to assuage Philemon’s anger against Onesimus and bring reconciliation between them, not as master and slave, but as brothers in Christ.

Philemon is controversial in modern Bible scholarship, as it has to do with slavery. Slavery is an uncomfortable topic for most Americans due to our 350-plus year history in this country of enslaving people of African descent. Nowadays, with the exception of Islamic and Communist countries, slavery is universally recognized as a terrible evil. Many of the so-called “New Atheists” are quick to point out that Paul was not an abolitionist. After all, he does not command or even ask for Philemon to free Onesimus and release him from his bondage.

Yet I believe we can safely say that Paul did not like slavery. He regards kidnappers and “enslavers” as “lawless” and “ungodly” sinners (1 Tim. 1:9-10). He encourages slaves to gain their freedom, if possible (1 Cor. 7:21). And even here, in his letter to Philemon, he explicitly states that the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is transformed by the power of the Gospel. Now their primary relationship is as brothers in Christ rather than as master and slave. As the editors of the *ESV Study Bible* write: “There is no doubt that it would have been difficult for this kind of servitude to survive in the atmosphere of love created by the letter...”¹

¹ *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 2353.

Here's the long and short of it. Paul wants Philemon to treat Onesimus well and welcome him warmly. He wants Philemon to *forgive* Onesimus and not hold his former sins against him. He him to take back Onesimus—"no longer as a bondservant [slave] but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord" (v. 16).

Now as Philemon's pastor and an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul was well within *his* rights to *demand* that his will be done. After all, the apostles were the fully-authorized ambassadors of Christ himself. Their word *is* the Word of God. And if it weren't for Paul's missionary efforts, Philemon would still be a pagan lost in his sins. As Paul says, Philemon owed him his very life (v. 19).

But rather than command Philemon, Paul appeals instead to love (vv. 8-9). Onesimus was "useful" to Paul during his imprisonment, yet he did not keep him against Philemon's will. "I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord" (v. 14). Paul also recognizes the wrong done by Onesimus against his master. Theft is no small thing! Paul writes what is, essentially, a blank check, promising to pay back Philemon so that Onesimus doesn't have to. "If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to *my* account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it..." (vv. 18-19a). In the end, Paul begs Philemon simply to do what Paul asks as a personal favor. "Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ" (v. 20). What's more, Paul begins and ends the letter with a blessing and prayer (vv. 3, 25).

We don't know how Philemon responded to Paul's letter. We have no record of it—no papyrus fragment to dig up in the dirt of ancient Greece. But Paul can be very persuasive. And

given the relationships that Paul had with both men, I'm confident that Philemon did well by Onesimus. After all, Paul calls Philemon his "beloved fellow worker" (v. 1) and "my brother" (v. 7). He calls Onesimus "my child" (v. 10), "my very heart" (v. 12), and a "beloved brother" (v. 16), describing him as "useful to you and to me" (v. 11).

The point of Paul's letter to Philemon is not to teach us about letter writing or slavery in the Roman Empire. The point of Paul's letter is to show us how to reconcile with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Because reconciliation of relationships is more important than resolution of material issues. People matter more than things. Although, for what it's worth, resolution of issues is usually much easier after personal reconciliation and forgiveness first take place.

When we find ourselves crossways with other people, it's very difficult for us to consider the other person's point of view or think of their needs. When we fall into a mentality of victimhood, we tend to feel self-righteous, and then it becomes more important for us to have our way—no matter the cost. Even if conflict is destroying our relationship with another person, we would rather be proven right than act in righteousness.

As Americans, we are obsessed with our rights. Our founding document, the Declaration of Independence, guarantees us "certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." The Bill of Rights (first ten amendments to the Constitution of the United States) includes the rights of free speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom to petition the government, freedom to peaceably assemble, and the right to bear arms, among others. These are all treasured rights and freedoms that we enjoy as Americans. Yet sometimes we focus so much on our rights that we forget about love.

Philemon was in his rights to punish Onesimus however he saw fit. Yet Paul appealed to Christian, brotherly love as a better response. In another place, Paul writes, "Do nothing from

rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3-4). In other words, we should consider other people’s needs and desires to be just as important—if not more important—than our own. Paul was *appalled* to discover that the Corinthian Christians were suing one another in secular courts of law. “To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?” (1 Cor. 6:7). Why not willingly take the short end of the stick, the smaller slice of pie, the worst part of the deal, in order to bear witness to the unfailing love of Jesus Christ?

For in the midst of conflict, we should always ask ourselves: Does my behavior in this situation make *God* look good? How do my words and actions impact my Christian witness to people around me? The Bible says that whatever we do, we should do it all for God’s glory (1 Cor. 10:31). This means that even the way we act in the midst of conflict reflects on the way people perceive God. Do they see Jesus in me, or do they just see a hurt, angry, bitter person?

Paul demonstrates remarkable skill as a mediator between his feuding friends in this letter. His words and actions through the whole situation point us to Jesus Christ, “the one mediator between God and men” (1 Tim. 2:5). In fact, Paul looks and acts a lot like Jesus in this episode—just as a disciple of Jesus should. For just as Paul did not demand his way with Philemon by apostolic fiat, so also God did not startle us into obedience with thunderbolts or hellfire. Instead he sent his Son, meek and mild, born in a manger, to bear our sin and suffer our punishment by an excruciating death on the cross. Instead of Philemon forcing Onesimus to pay him back for the loss of his property, Paul asked Philemon to charge it to his account. Paul himself would repay Onesimus’s debt. So also Jesus took the blame and punishment for our sin. Our evil deeds and disobedience were charged to *his* account, and he paid the bill “not with...

silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ...” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). Jesus paid our sin debt so that we could be forgiven and brought back into God’s family, not as slaves, but as sons and daughters of the King and as brothers and sisters in Christ. In his great attempt to reconcile the world to himself in Christ Jesus, God did not resort to coercion or power. Instead, he appeals to love: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Before Christ came into our hearts, we were all runaways like Onesimus. We were slaves to sin, dead in our trespasses. But Jesus paid for everything we ever did wrong. He paid our debt, forgave our sins, and broke our chains. We are free—free in Christ!

Now God calls us to use our Christian freedom to serve one another (Gal. 5:13). We’re no longer slaves to sin. We are part of God’s family now. We are his children now. Our actions and words reflect the character of our heavenly Father and our big Brother, Jesus. “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:31-32). How did Christ forgive you? Fully, freely, willingly, gladly, and unconditionally. So that is how Paul called Philemon to forgive Onesimus. And that is the only way we can forgive the people who wrong us. Forgiveness is the ultimate freedom. In the name of Jesus, Amen.