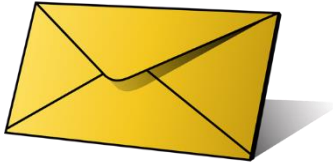


A transformation

Philemon 1-25 (July 3, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

In planning for this service, Lois suggested that I preach on one of the short, and possibly overlooked, books of the Bible. “That will be our theme for the summer,” she explained: “Short *or* overlooked books of the Bible.” It’s rare that we read through an entire book at one sitting. But that is what we’ve accomplished already this morning. We just read the whole book of Philemon! It’s only 25 verses long.



It’s a *letter*, in fact. A piece of personal correspondence between the apostle Paul, and a friend of his, named Philemon. In reading it today, we get to listen to their conversation. We’re not the first to do this. Paul offers greetings to the church that meets in Philemon’s home. Perhaps Paul always intended this letter to be read in front of the congregation.



The letter concerns a third person: a slave named Onesimus. We should note that slavery was common in that era. The Roman economy depended on it. There were 60 million slaves. Some slaves did well in that society – occupying positions of responsibility, and endearing themselves to the families they worked for. Yet they were *still* slaves, bought and sold as a commodity.

Into this situation steps Paul, who has just befriended a slave belonging to his friend, Philemon. This slave served Paul while in prison. In fact, he grew quite fond of him. Onesimus, became a Christian. He accepted the message of Jesus. And he’s a changed person.

Paul would love to have Onesimus remain with him. But he’s decided to write Philemon and invite them both into a *new* kind of relationship.

Does Christianity do that? Can faith change our relationships? Can it overcome long-established ways of being – structures, habits, traditions, institutions? Long-standing divisions? Can it make wrongs right? Can it change the order of the world, and the order of our lives?

Consider, for a moment, what needs to change in *your* life. Is there brokenness in any of your relationships with others ... friends, neighbours or family members? Grudges that are held, debts that are owed? Do any of these things trouble you? Do they keep you up at night?



This is Canada Day weekend. And I hope you’ve had a chance to ponder the *great blessing* it is to live in this beautiful land. We should all be thankful, full of gratitude. Along with this, we should also acknowledge the history of our country, with its colonial past, its treatment of minority groups, and the injustices that have taken place over time. *Any* country, if we’re honest with ourselves, will have a shadow side. Because we are, after all, human.

I was looking recently at a piece of writing that my Great Aunt Pearl left for her family. She admired her forebears, and was grateful for what she had received from them. “May we copy their virtues, and not their vices,” she wrote. “Without signposts from the past there would be no guideposts for the future.”

In other words, we need to examine our past. Keep what's good, learn from what's not so good, and try to become better, if we can. It's very good advice.



Well, there's a history to the relationships in today's letter. I told you that Paul valued his relationship with Onesimus. But now, as he writes to Philemon, his slave-owning friend, he hints at some kind of *trouble*. Something has happened between Philemon and Onesimus that needs to be set right. Paul pleads on the poor slave's behalf. "Formerly he was useless to you," he writes.

Useless? This was a common way of describing slaves who had done something wrong: "Useless!" you would say. "No good." And therefore, "No value."

What had Onesimus done? Had he stolen something? Had he run away? To run away was a serious offence. And it meant that Onesimus was in big trouble. I mean the kind of trouble that could get you beaten, imprisoned or worse.

Paul intervenes, claiming that Onesimus is not "useless," but just the opposite. "He's been 'useful' to me. I think he could be 'useful' to you as well!"

Paul pleads with Philemon to receive Onesimus. "He was separated from you for a while. But now I am sending him back to you." And listen to this: "I'm sending him no longer as a slave, but *more* than a slave – a beloved *brother*."

Did you hear that? A beloved brother! We're not talking slave language anymore. We're talking a member of the family!



Can you see the radical kind of change that Paul is proposing? Take this slave, this delinquent slave. This one, whom you have every legal right to punish severely. This one who's done you wrong. Receive him. Forgive him. Welcome him – not just as a slave, but as a brother in Christ.

That's what Christianity does, don't you see? Paul says, "It's changed my relationship with Onesimus," and now it can change yours as well. I consider Onesimus to be my son. I want you to receive him as a member of your family.

"Whatever wrong he's done, I'll look after it. If he's stolen something, I'll repay. I will do whatever it takes to put things right between you. See, I'm writing this with my own hand."

What we have here is a leader of the church, a prominent, educated person, and a documented Roman citizen (Paul was all these things) pleading on behalf of a slave who had disgraced himself, broken the law and violated his master's trust. Paul advocates on this slave's behalf.

Has anyone ever done that for you? Valued you? Vouched for you? Given you a second chance? It seems to me that's exactly what Christ has done for every one of us. And now we are given the chance to do it for another.

Jesus told a parable once about a manager who'd been forgiven an enormous debt, but couldn't forgive a fellow who owed him very little. (Matthew 18:23-35) We are called to forgive. We are called to reconcile. We are called to build a new community.

And this is hard work. It won't be easy for Philemon to do this. It won't be easy for *us* to do it. But it is Christ's work.

"Take him back," says Paul. "I'm confident that you will. Not because I command it, but because the grace and mercy of Christ is at work in your heart. Refresh my heart in Christ," he urges.

Wouldn't it be a joy if Philemon did this? Wouldn't it make Paul happy? Wouldn't the angels of heaven sing? Wouldn't the other members of the church that met in Philemon's home, the ones listening to this letter, wouldn't they learn something *crucial* about the Christian way?

And wouldn't *all* this put a smile on the face of Jesus – the great reconciler, the healer, the redeemer of slaves and masters, and apostles and all sorts and conditions of people?



Everyone's watching to see what will happen next. And the thing is, we don't know. Was Paul's plea effective? Did Philemon receive this slave back? Did the power of the gospel actually work?

It's intriguing to note that there is a person named Onesimus who became a bishop in the early church. Wouldn't it be something if it was *this* Onesimus? According to church tradition, Paul's friend, Philemon, went on to be the bishop of Colossae. And his other friend, Onesimus, went on to be the bishop of Ephesus. And both men were martyred during the reign of Nero.

"If this is true," writes the Rev. Samuel Doyle, "then the slave owner and the slave would have abandoned their worldly titles and taken one another on as beloved brothers, serving together, leading together and ultimately dying together."¹

What a story that would be! And all from this little book we rarely read. It's an amazing transformation!



Does Christianity have power to change relationships? Does the gospel have power to change our world, and change our lives? You bet it does!

On this Canada Day weekend, we think of all the wounds that need to be mended. The injustices that need to be made right. All the things, in our own personal lives, that need to change.

The Gospel has a *levelling* effect. It dismantles structures that place one person above another. It says that we're all, fundamentally, God's beloved children. And that we live by God's grace. And so these distinctions we set up, these barriers that continue to separate us one from another, must ultimately be dismantled.

What is it Paul writes in another place? "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) We are *one*. Of course our many and varied differences, the things that make us uniquely who we are, these remain. Yet, in Christ, we are one.

¹ Rev. Samuel Doyle, "Voices: Justice looks like Onesimus, the bishop of Ephesus," September 13, 2021. <https://www.baptiststandard.com/opinion/voices/justice-looks-like-onesimus-the-bishop-of-ephesus/>, Accessed July 1, 2022.



So today I want you to think about your life, and the places that still need healing. Think about your friends, your neighbours, your family members. Think about that one person who is so difficult to get along with. The one who owes you something. The one who did you wrong. Or did *you* do something wrong?

And now think about this short and often overlooked book of the Bible. And think about the power it reveals, the power to re-order our human lives. Our customs and traditions. Our economic arrangements. Our families and friendships. The communities we live in. Everything!

It took centuries, sadly, for slavery to come to an end. (Actually, it's not quite ended yet.) But the beginning of slavery's demise is found right here: In the idea that all God's people have value and worth. And in Paul's discovery of a slave who became a friend. A son, a brother, a member of the family.

Sometimes we think that things will never change. That they will always stay the same. And that can be a discouraging thought. But the power of God's love in Jesus is still at work in our world, transforming our human lives. May it be so!