

November 18, 2018

TEXT: Philemon 1–21

TITLE: Big Themes, Little Books: The Cost of Freedom

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Imagine this scene. It is the first century AD, thirty or forty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, in the Greek city of Colossae. A small house-church of Christians is gathered in the home of Philemon and Apphia for prayer and worship. They meet behind closed doors, because they are looked upon with suspicion by others in their community. There's a knock on the door; the room falls silent. When the door is opened, to everyone's surprise there stands Onesimus. Now, the biblical information we have on Onesimus is a bit vague, but it seems he was a slave or servant or relative of Philemon who had broken off all ties some time earlier. His disappearance had left a bitter taste in Philemon's mouth. Everyone watched to see what would happen next when Onesimus extends his hand, which contains a letter. A gasp of excitement goes up when Philemon announces that it is from Paul, who was in prison in Ephesus about 100 miles west of there.

Paul had taught the Christian faith to Philemon and frankly to most of the people gathered in that house. His letter is short, so Philemon reads it aloud. It sounds so much like the Paul they remembered—loving, direct, and persuasive. It is clear what Paul wants. Onesimus the runaway had been with Paul—not only as a servant, helping Paul in prison, but as a student, learning and accepting the gospel of Christ. Now Paul has sent him back. He even makes a pun about Onesimus' name, which means “useful.” Paul notes that during his time away, Onesimus was “useless” to Philemon, but in returning home, he could prove quite “useful” again. As Onesimus stands silently before him, it is clear that Paul wants Philemon to show forgiveness and reconciliation—in fact, he wants him to pay the cost of true freedom. It is unspoken yet written boldly between the lines of the short letter and reinforced by that final verse: *Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.*

The three main characters in this letter all have something on the line, something at risk. Paul is putting his reputation on the line, sending this letter trying to persuade Philemon to act in a certain way. Philemon has been put on the spot before the whole church, with the prodigal Onesimus standing before him, deserving of punishment but whom Paul wants now to be treated as a useful brother in Christ. And then there's Onesimus, who has risked the most to return home—putting himself at the mercy of one whom he has angered, entrusting his life to this new gospel of Christ with its message of reconciliation and love. Faith isn't cheap or easy. And freedom—Christian freedom—always comes at a cost.

Freedom moves in two directions at once. There is freedom from something negative and freedom for something positive. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously spoke of the four freedoms, he used those terms: freedom from want, freedom from fear—as well as freedom to speak publicly and freedom to worship openly. For most of us, the stronger motivation is the negative one—to be free “from” things that are oppressive,

burdensome and unjust. Here's a frivolous example: A friend of mine is the music director at a Lutheran church. For a recent church fundraiser, he raffled off banning a hymn. The highest bidders could make sure they were free from singing a hymn they disliked for one full year. Now if that type of raffle will pay off our church mortgage, I'll consider it.

Many choices in life involve both freedom "from" and freedom "for." High school civics teachers routinely talk about how pilgrims and immigrants to America over the years have responded to both being "pushed" and "pulled." People move to a new land because of the pull of economic opportunities, educational opportunities, health care or social network reasons. People also emigrate to new lands because of the outward push due to the lack of jobs, political persecutions, famines, fear, and natural disasters at home. "Pushes" are reactive, "Pulls" are aspirational.

Now sometimes the push and the pull work together for positive change. That was the goal of Paul's letter to Philemon. Paul began with the "pull" of telling how he thanks God for all of Philemon's faithfulness and acts of loving kindness towards others, done in the name of Christ—even as Paul used an effective "push" by including this request about Onesimus in a letter that would be publicly read and heard by others. In verse 8, Paul names a negative "push"—that he is bold enough in Christ to command Philemon to do his duty—but then he turns it into a positive "pull," saying *I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love*. Every parent—every teacher—knows how to balance out rewards and punishments, threats and encouragements, in order to bring out the best in their children or students. So it is no surprise that the ways of faith involve the same pushing and pulling dynamics.

So what's the takeaway from all this? 1) Life involves both positive and negative motivations—things we hope for, things we try to avoid. Yes, that's true. 2) People we meet in this world will at times disappoint us, but if we can be loving and seek true reconciliation, then community can be restored and, like Onesimus, those we thought were "useless" can again be "useful" siblings in Christ. Yes, that's also true. But there's something else in this letter that is much more personal and which is aimed at each one of us.

As you already know, one of my heroes is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In a commencement speech he gave at Brandeis University in 2000, Tutu didn't mince words about the costs of Christian faith and Christian freedom. He said that just like Martin Luther King, Jr., he too had a dream. He said "I have a dream that my children one day will recognize they are members of a family—that they are siblings together in a family where there are no outsiders." He talked about this family being guided by Christian ethics and said that in such a family you don't say, "Hey granny, grandpa, your contribution to the family budget isn't very much, so you don't deserve much. Hey, little baby, your contribution is nil; you're only going to get from the family in proportion to what you put in." Then Tutu's eyes began to flash and he said, "No family, no good family, no healthy family ever says that...If we are family, how can we spend such obscene amounts of money on what we call defense budgets? How can we do that

when we know that a small fraction of that budget is enough to satisfy God's children so they have clean water, enough to eat, a good education, and a safe environment? If we are family, how can we let those in the Third World groan under the burden of unpayable debts? God gave you these resources so you can be God's hands and feet. You can't be arguing about this; this is not for your sake—it is for the family. And all belong—rich, poor, black, white, red, green, educated, not educated, gay, lesbian, straight, all, all belong. God says this is my dream.”

In a real way, that is the message contained in Philemon's letter being held out to us this day as we've gathered in church to hear the word of God. It has once again been read publicly. It has both a “push” and a “pull” in it—scripture commanding us to do what is right coupled with the grace of Christ's spirit telling us “I know you will do even more than I say.”

That's also why this little book in the New Testament isn't named after Onesimus. Ultimately it is not about the runaway slave, the estranged brother. It is not about his return as a prodigal seeking forgiveness and restoration to the community. The book is named after Philemon who, like us, has to pay the cost to make things right. He has to seek freedom from sin—from anger and grudges, from legalism and racism and demands for full satisfaction under the law. He has to seek freedom for something—for a new beginning with his brother, reconciliation and hope, an embrace instead of disdain, peace instead of war.

Toxic Christianity relies only on the negative push of fire and brimstone. Biblical Christianity prioritizes the aspirational pull, urging us forward into true freedom. It points to the crucified Jesus who stands between God and the world, with an arm around each, taking into his own body the pain and hurt and fear so that all might be reconciled at last. It also points to the resurrected Christ whose victory over death gives us hope and sets us free at last. But this freedom comes at a cost—the cost of humbly letting go of our pride and power and privilege, of reaching across divides and doing far more than what is required. But it is totally worth it. This day Paul is talking to us and as always, he is loving, direct and persuasive, pulling us into faith. He says to us (verse 20)—*Let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.* Who are we to refuse?