

“The Runaway Returns”

Liturgical Date: Proper 18 C

Primary Text: Philemon (whole book of 25 verses)

I greet you today with the same greeting that St. Paul wrote to his friend Philemon: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints (v3-5). The primary text for today, the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, is our Epistle Lesson-which is the entirety of the short Bible book of Philemon. The title of the sermon is “The Runaway Returns.” JESUS ADVOCATES FOR REBELLIOUS RUNAWAYS SO THAT WE MAY BE RECEIVED AS BROTHERS/SISTERS AND DAUGHTERS/SONS.

Today is unique in that our reading is an entire Book of the Bible, albeit one so short it does not even have chapter divisions. In full disclosure, the lectionary actually ends the reading at verse 21 but I figured with only 4 more verses in the book that we would just go for the whole thing! This book is actually a letter as is typical in the Scripture that Paul authored. The recipient of the letter bears the name of the book, Philemon.

This letter is short and the main goal of it is straightforward. Paul writes to a friend named Philemon, sending greetings and complimenting his faith. Paul has met a runaway slave named Onesimus in Rome, who in fact belonged to Philemon. Paul is sending this runaway back to Philemon. Onesimus has been converted to the Christian faith and Paul asks his friend to receive Onesimus and be merciful to him.

Reading this in our modern American context, there is an “elephant in the room” regarding Philemon. You all know I don’t like to pretend such “elephants” aren’t here, so I will address it. It is of course the element of slavery. St. Paul is sending a runaway slave back to his master. Knowing what we know about slavery in American history and the racial tensions are increasing in our day, “slavery” is definitely a “loaded” word that brings up unpleasant images and connotations. The fact that Paul is sending a runaway slave back could cause us to scratch our heads and could even serve as fodder for the opponents of Christianity to say, “see your Bible condones something as bad as slavery.”

If we looked at what the Bible says in numerous places about slavery that could definitely take a while. *The Lutheran Study Bible* contains a good article that is an overview of what the Bible says about slavery (you may want to include this in the bulletin for people to read later). You do need to understand that slavery in the Roman Empire was significantly different than what slavery was in the American context.

First of all, slavery in the American experience obviously is viewed in the context of race. The slaves that were forcibly brought to and sold in the Americas were black Africans. Slave owners were almost exclusively white. Roman slavery does not have this stark racial division as slaves were of various races. Secondly, the nature of how one became a slave was much different. Slaves were often prisoners taken in wars or people that owned someone a debt who would become a slave to repay it. Some people even voluntarily entered into Roman slavery as a way to try to earn Roman citizenship. Thirdly, your status as a slave was usually not permanent. For younger people, it usually ended at age 30. In American slavery, slaves had little hope of every being freed and even worse their children would be born

into a life of perpetual slavery. Finally, Roman slaves could even legally earn wages, enter into contracts, and sometimes even owned slaves themselves. Many slaves were highly skilled and not only manual laborers, serving in positions of responsibility including even delivering babies! I explain this to you not to say Roman slavery was a pleasant thing or something that we can call good, but that we would understand the differences between in and what we think of when we here the words “slave” or “slavery”. Some modern translations translate it as “servant” and the ESV translates it as “bondservant” which I think is a good term to use.

If we are looking to a parallel to American slavery in the Bible the closest one would be the Hebrews in Egypt. There we had a group of people forced into slavery, it was based on ethnicity and the concept of racial superiority, and the Egyptians had no intentions of freeing them. And we know what God thought about and did about His people in freeing them from bondage in Egypt. Furthermore, “manstealing” is specifically condemned in the New Testament in 1 Timothy 1:10, which we will actually hear next Sunday. So the act of capturing another human being for the sole purpose of taking them away and forcing to work for you without pay is clearly sinful.

Now this the “elephant” dealt with, lets move to some background of this letter. It of course was written by St. Paul, in his “own hand” he tells us in verse 19. It was composed about 60 AD while Paul was a prisoner in Rome. So this adds to the element of speaking about bondage as Paul knows a good bit about it himself with his current situation.

This letter was specifically addressed to an individual who was part of the church at Colossae. This short personal letter would be sent with a longer letter addressed to the church at Colossae as a whole-you can read it

in your Bible as the Book of Colossians. How do we know that? Read Colossians 4:7-9 and it tells us that a man named Tychicus would be delivering the letter with guess who? Verse 9, *“With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.”* Can you imagine the shock of Philemon when Onesimus shows up? An explanation was needed and thus the personal letter to Philemon would be sent.

Philemon was a man of means. He obviously had wealth because he had at least one slave. Furthermore, he had a big home for the time because verse 2 tells us that the congregation at Colossae met in his house (as the early church typically met in people’s homes). He was also a friend of St. Paul. Almost certainly he was converted under Paul’s ministry as Paul references in verse 19 that he owes “me even your own self.” The warm greeting and complimentary words that Paul has for Philemon in verses 1-7 show that Philemon was a man of faith and that he and Paul had a bond as good friends.

But with all of these accolades, Paul is going to ask his friend to do something. It is something that based on his position he could have ordered Philemon to do (verse 8), but rather than commanding Paul is instead going to “appeal” or “beseech” Philemon in guiding him to do the right thing. And it is a pretty big request. He wants Philemon to forgive and receive Onesimus without punishing him. Even more than that, see verse 16, *“no longer as a bondservant (slave) but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother”* and verse 17 *“receive him as you would receive me”*. Paul is not just asking for Philemon to allow Onesimus to resume his duties as a slave without punishment, but for him to serve alongside Philemon and the brothers and sisters at Colossae as a free man.

But yourself in Philemon's shoes for a moment. Onesimus had run away from him. This had cost him a lot of money. The things that Onesimus was doing (and remember it may have been a specific skill), he now had to hire someone else to do. Furthermore, the implication of the letter is that when Onesimus had fled he stole from Philemon as in verses 18-19 Paul offers to reimburse Philemon financially. And it would make sense that if you were going to run away that you would take what you could of value to finance your life after escape. Also remember what we learned about Roman slavery. It is possible that Onesimus voluntarily became a slave to pay off a debt he owed. And he almost certainly would have been released from bondage at a later time. So basically he "flew the coop" not wanting to keep working and took what he could with him. The law was on Philemon's side too. Runaway slaves and thieves could be executed.

Understanding all of this, Paul asks for mercy for Onesimus. Why? Why would he go out on a limb for this runaway slave? Very simply, the Onesimus who had run away was not the Onesimus that returned. He had been converted to the faith and had become a key helper to Paul during his imprisonment. In fact, Onesimus literally means "useful" or "profitable". He speaks of Onesimus as being his "child" (v10). In returning him he says he is "sending my very heart" (v12). In fact, Paul said he would have been glad to keep Onesimus with him, but believed he should send him back (v13). Onesimus had received forgiveness in Jesus Christ and was a changed man. He was now on an equal spiritual "plane" as Philemon and Paul, as a forgiven sinner redeemed in Christ. He feels so strongly about this in that Onesimus should be received back as a free man that Paul, who usually used a scribe and had eye trouble, makes the point that he writes this letter in his own hand (v19).

So what happened? Of course the Bible does not tell us as this letter was written making the request. But according to the Church Fathers, Philemon did as Paul wrote “even more than I say”. They write that Philemon did forgive and grant Onesimus his freedom. Tradition is that he served the Lord faithfully and became the bishop of the church at Berea.

Your bulletin cover says, “*Philemon, a small book with a big message.*” John Wesley said of Philemon, “*This single epistle infinitely transcends all the wisdom of the world.*” You may be thinking: Well, pastor it is an interesting story. I understand a little more about the context of the time, including slavery. I see how Paul is being very kind here to advocate for Onesimus and his freedom. But is this kind of a tack-on to the New Testament canon since it was written by St. Paul? Or is there more? Is there a greater spiritual principle here, one that can apply to all of us?

The answer lies in what Martin Luther said about this short book, “*We are all God’s Onesimus’ (Onesimi) if we believe.*” Do you get it? Do you see it? Do you see why this short book about the return of a runaway slave relates to us? This is powerful Gospel. It is grace and mercy being applied as opposed to works-righteousness and legalism. The Law says one thing and grace says another. It says we are forgiven in Jesus.

We are Onesimus. You are a slave. Everyone is. Now there are two types of slaves: slaves to the world and slaves to God. One road leads to death and damnation and the other to freedom and eternal life. In thinking that we will be happier if we do things our own way we have all run away from our Master. And we grabbed whatever we could on the way out. We have rebelled against God. We have not trusted Him. We have demanded what we want when we want it. And for this, the just Law of God condemns

us. We only deserve His wrath and temporal and eternal punishment. We can only run for so long, because the “long arm of the law” will accost us.

But when we repent of our sins, when we receive saving faith, we have an advocate. An advocate who knows the Father, His Father and our Father, very well. An advocate who appeals not to legalism, but love. An advocate with a treasury so great that it can pay for any sin, any rebellion where we have racked up a debt we could never repay. An advocate who we serve, but chooses to not call us slaves but brothers. Paul was a fine advocate for Onesimus, but we have the best advocate before the Father-His only begotten Son Jesus Christ.

Paul appealed to Philemon that he would repay anything that Onesimus had cost him or taken. *“Charge it to my account. I will repay it”* (v18-19). My friends, Jesus has paid it all for us! Not with silver or gold, but with His Holy precious blood. The blood that flowed from His hands, feet, brow, and side. His death for us. The righteous one, the only one who could and did take our place has won our forgiveness, won our adoption into God’s family of faith.

Though our sins are scarlet, we are washed white as snow in the blood of Jesus. When the Father, our Lord, looks upon all of those with faith He sees not our wretched sins nor our filthy-rag works, but He sees His perfect son Jesus. The righteousness of Christ has been imputed to us. Not out of compulsion, but out of mercy, love, and grace. The same words that Paul wrote to Philemon in verse 18 regarding how he should receive Onesimus back reflect what our advocate before the Father, Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, speaks concerning us, *“Receive him as you would receive me.”* The runaway has returned.

I leave you with the same benediction that Paul closes in speaking to Philemon, “*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*” Amen.