

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

Today we read all but the last four verses of the Letter to Philemon – which is the shortest Epistle in the New Testament. For all that it is short, it has had an outsized influence on culture and history.

Specifically, this letter became a site of contestation over the morality of slavery in the United States – too often used as a justification. The traditional interpretation assumed Onesimus was a runaway slave (something not explicitly stated in the letter) whom Paul was returning to his proper master. If, therefore, Paul did not explicitly condemn slavery, the argument went, why should we?¹ And even more, if Paul is returning a slave to his master, does this not mean we too should support such action?

What this overlooked, of course, were the differences between slavery in antiquity and the practice of race-based chattel slavery in the United States. But even more than that, it ignored the way this epistle is a powerful witness to the ways the gospel demands we reimagine how we relate to one another.

¹ Eric D. Barreto, "Philemon", *The New Testament Fortress Commentary on the Bible*.

When you take a closer read of this letter you see that there are few solid clues about the nature of the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus. Scholars today think that instead of Onesimus running away, he was most likely sent to Paul by Philemon to care for Paul's needs in prison – and perhaps stayed away longer than originally charged to do.

You see, prisoners in antiquity relied on the kindness of friends and family to provide for their daily needs. There was no cafeteria or commissary in an ancient prison, and so one's provisions came from those who visited you there.²

It seems likely that during his time assisting Paul, Onesimus became a Christian under his tutelage. How this may, or may not, have played into conflict we don't know, but what we do see is Paul writing these words to Philemon concerning his slave:

I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love...I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment...

and

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother...

and

...welcome him as you would welcome me...

These are not the words of someone supporting slavery – this is the gospel word of: the first shall be last and the last shall be first – blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and you when people hate, exclude, and revile you – and even whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

² Eric D. Barreto, "Philemon", *The New Testament Fortress Commentary on the Bible*.

Because what Paul is pointing to in this letter is the same thing Jesus was pointing to in today's gospel passage from Luke.

I'll be honest, this is never a fun gospel to proclaim – and it feels wrong to say “The Gospel of Christ – Thanks be to God.” Thanks be to God we're supposed to hate people? But the language is so stark because it's meant to be.

This was Jesus at his most provocative and hyperbolic self – grabbing the attention of the crowd around him, and indeed us today all these centuries later. And so the question always arises, does he mean everything he says in these verses literally?

Are we really called to hate family and even life itself? Must we expect crucifixion in order to be his disciple? Do we actually have to give up all our possessions?

The answer is no, and yet... And yet what all of those ask hyperbolic statements ask us to do – and indeed what the example of the man building the tower and the king waging war demonstrate – is that there is a cost to following Jesus, and part of that cost is that we commit to follow his ways and not the ways of the world.

This is seen over and over again throughout the gospels in the ways Jesus changed social relationships: he spoke to women and counted them as disciples, he broke bread with sinners and outcasts, he touched lepers.

In short, he eschewed the social hierarchies of his day – the way society said some were better and some were expendable – and instead he proclaimed God's vision for humanity.

It is this gospel message that Paul took up in Philemon. It is a letter that paints a vivid illustration of the careful cultural negotiations people of faith must grapple with in a complex world. The critical theological question Paul addressed in this brief personal correspondence was this:

If God has drawn people together into communities of faith, how then are we to relate to one another when the dictates of the wider culture lead us toward division and social stratification rather than toward unity and equality?³

And is that not a question for us today as well? How many of you feel the relentless pull of division in our wider culture? And do we not have ever-increasing social stratification, when the richest 1 percent in the United States now owns more income than the bottom 90 percent?⁴

What are we to do?

We are, as always, to follow Jesus. This means we are to resist the ways in which the world calls us to be in relationship with others, and instead are to live the way of love. It means where there is hate, we sow love. Where there is division, we sow compassion. And where there is fear, we sow hope.

We are a people whose entire identity is rooted in hope – the hope of the resurrection. And so hope, love, and compassion are the tools we must use, here and now, to transform the brokenness of the world. I pray that God may give us the strength to do this work – that we may be believers in both word and deed.

~ Amen ~

³ Eric D. Barreto, "Philemon", *The New Testament Fortress Commentary on the Bible*.

⁴ Kristof, Nicholas (July 22, 2014). "An Idiot's Guide to Inequality". *The New York Times*.