

A Sermon for Highland Presbyterian Church

An Admiral I admire always promised his hearers that he would "**Be Brief, Be Brilliant, and Be Gone!**" Paul is undoubtedly brief in this epistle to Philemon, consisting of a mere 335 words in the original Greek, which he wrote while under house arrest in an undetermined location. I will endeavor to follow Paul's example of brevity but won't make it in under 335 words. As for being brilliant, I leave it up to all of you, our scripture writer, and the Lord. Let's work toward being gone so we may live our faith in action as partners in God's message and work of grace.

We all come to Scripture from our own context. I read and study Scripture using the hermeneutical lens of suspicion and trust, or as my military colleagues would call it, **a trust by verified perspective**. I trust in God, and the wholeness of Scripture, reflecting the transformative message of God's love and grace for all creation. I also confirm that trust through lived experience, asking thoughtful and sometimes challenging questions of God, Scripture, and even myself. Today, I want to try a new thing, a lens of radical hospitality called generosity.

This letter addressed to Philemon is a private communication between and about believers, image-bearers of God whom God loves, whom God loved and forgave and forgives, and forgives first. Sometimes as created beings, we forget that beautiful reality, that truth, that God equally loves all humanity and loves us first. We forget God's radical welcome and grace of forgiveness as we live in the opposing dichotomies of God and empire, Christ-minded and worldly-minded thoughts and actions. Paul, albeit imperfectly, illustrates how to live within those polar dichotomies of life. Paul models a means for resolving conflict using another form of radical hospitality; deep-seated, gospel-empowered, Christ-minded act of grace and forgiveness for reconciliation of conflict in and amongst the Body of Christ. In other words, Paul models how we are to treat one another in love as siblings, as equals in Christ, and with forgiveness.

Siblings in Christ, this letter is addressed to us. If we look closely, we will see many characters described in this letter, and we have been, are, or could be any or all of those characters. We have Paul, who everyone knows is an Apostle. However, he does not use that title here, but he uses his influence to mediate a reconciliation between two family members in Christ and within the Body of Christ. Haven't we had to mediate conflict between members and within the Body of Christ here at Highland Presbyterian Church and beyond?

In Paul's letter, the two believers, siblings in Christ, are Onesimus and Philemon. Onesimus is an enslaved person, a runaway, or in modern terms, an oppressed, marginalized person in this situation. Philemon is a person of some wealth and status who is portrayed as both the injured party and the oppressor. Then there is the Body of Christ, the church which meets in Philemon's home. We know they are there, but what part **do they** or **will they** play in the reconciliation of Onesimus and Philemon? What role will we play in reconciliation and the process of Christ's radical transformation of broken hearts, broken trust, and broken systems?

Every one of us has made mistakes, done things we regret, failed to act, wounded people, and needs forgiveness from God and one another. Hear the good news, beloved; God loves and claims us, even when we cannot understand why. God's loving act of grace gives us the means to repent, forgive, and be reconciled. However, repentance and forgiveness do not automatically mean no consequences for our wrongdoing. I think the Apostle Paul reminds us of this when he

A Sermon for Highland Presbyterian Church

offers to make restitution for **anything** Onesimus may owe Philemon. In this instance, we can only speculate what Onesimus could owe Philemon, as Paul does not tell us. But Paul offers to pay Onesimus's debt to Philemon using his influence more passively, making space for Philemon's agency or free will to determine the moral choice and action. Risky? Perhaps. Sound familiar? Sound like God's gift of grace through Christ as the means of grace for all who will but receive it?

I wonder, did Philemon take Paul up on that offer, or did he forgive Onesimus of any possible debt without it? Weekly we pray for God to forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors. **Have we forgiven our debtors or persons with whom we are in conflict?**

Reconciliation in the faith family is a real need in today's world and is challenging. In our brokenness, it is easy for us to fail, except we have the transformative power of our Lord, the crucified Christ who loves us, forgives us, and sends us out into the world to share that act of grace. I think that is what sharing our faith is here, as Paul mentions in the letter, to share that act of grace and forgiveness and reconciliation.

In considering the totality of this epistle, **I want to acknowledge the veritable herd of complicated challenges clamoring for our attention.**

Like my former pastor, I try not to judge anyone, especially not another person's ministry decisions. **But**, Paul's letter, I must admit, is complicated and problematic. Paul's letter is difficult for us as social justice-minded 21st-century Christians. Why? Because **he does not make any overt statements about the horror and wrongness of enslavement**, and the fact that the letter writer, the enslaved, and the enslaver are all believers in Christ Jesus is particularly challenging. **The realities in this letter are complex**; first-century Christians were a small fledgling group; the Roman Empire was dominant, the enslavement of persons was legal, and the enslaved outnumbered the enslavers. It is also important to note one key difference between Roman enslavement and the American Chattel variety – race. The Roman Empire did not enslave persons because of race; their motivations were primarily economics and a means of security in times of war. **No less horrific and, yes, still problematic.**

Perhaps you are sitting here asking God, the text, and yourself similar questions and thoughts as I, for I have many questions that Paul does not answer. I wonder: whose voices remain silenced in Paul's letter? Did any of the primary characters know that enslaving people was morally wrong? What went through Onesimus's mind when Paul sent him back to his enslaver with nothing but a letter by way of help? Did Onesimus return willingly to Philemon? Did Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the church that met in Philemon's home welcome Onesimus with radical hospitality? Did Philemon forgive Onesimus; did Onesimus forgive Philemon; could true reconciliation between two image-bearers occur without freely submitting to God and one another in mutual repentance and forgiveness? So many questions and not enough answers here, Paul, leaving us needing help to unpack the challenges, engage our sacred imaginations, and discover their missing voices. Are we ready for that deeper conversation? Will we do more than we are asked?

Siblings in Christ, God loves us, and God forgives us through the redeeming gift of grace. Through that grace, we are transformed. Hear the good news. And because God loves and forgives us, we can become acts of God's grace by forgiving others.

In the name of God, the One who Loves, the One who Forgives, the One who Sends