

Sermon – Philemon

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Today I would like us to focus on this unique letter of Paul's which he addressed to Philemon. To understand this letter we need to understand Paul's background.

Five years ago, Hurricane Katrina struck the city of New Orleans with the result that many of the residents who were evacuated were dispersed to cities across the United States. When the hurricane had passed and restoration had begun, these people started to trickle back, but some never returned for various reasons, some were too poor to return, others were afraid, others knew there was little or nothing for them to return to. A similar event had occurred in the nation of Israel across a span of several generations some 2700 years ago. First the Northern Kingdom was captured by the Assyrians and many of its people were carried off to exile in the city of Ninevah. A few generations later the Southern Kingdom was captured by Nebuchadnezzar and many of its citizens carried off to exile in the city of Babylon, then Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonians and allowed all the refugee peoples to return home. However, it had been several generations since they had been captured and some had assimilated into the cultures of their captors, many returned to Palestine, but others decided for various reasons that they would seek their fortunes elsewhere. Many of the latter group moved into cities in the area of Asia Minor which we now know as Turkey but also some as far away as Greece and Rome. This dispersion is known as the diaspora.

When the New Orleans refugees settled in cities across our country, they could find familiar religious communities already established – Baptists could find a Baptist Church, Methodists a Methodist Church, Catholics a Catholic parish, etc. That was not so for the Jews in the middle of the first millennium before the birth of Jesus. So, to be faithful to their Jewish roots they had to establish their own synagogues which they did in many cities in the Mediterranean world. Paul was a product of this diaspora. We believe Paul was born about the same time as Jesus, which was several centuries after the original diaspora. He was born in the city of Tarsus on the southern coast of Asia Minor a bit northeast of the island of Cyprus.

At the time of Paul's birth, the Mediterranean world was controlled militarily and politically by Rome, but the cultural influence was predominately Greek, which included philosophy, religions, and language. Therefore Paul's name had two forms. His family being devout Jews had named him Saul, presumably after Israel's first king. The Greek form of the name "Saul" was Paul. So, when operating in Jewish regions, he would have been known as Saul, and when in Hellenized regions, those under Greek cultural influence, he would have been called Paul. We know little about his family other than the fact that they were devout Jews and also they apparently had become Roman citizens, as Paul claims Roman citizenship in his writings. Being a Roman citizen had significant value in Paul's time, particularly in relationship to punishment for crime which even extended to the form of execution. Roman citizens could not be crucified – the most tortuous and painful form of execution known - but if condemned for a capital crime, they were beheaded, a fate that at least was mercifully swift. This gives rise to the tradition that Paul was beheaded in Rome sometime between the years of 63 and 65 of the first century.

His parents apparently were affluent enough to send Paul back to Jerusalem to the temple to be educated. A Jerusalem temple education was considered at that time to be the best education a Jewish boy could receive – perhaps the equivalent of an Oxford or Harvard education in our times. He writes that he sat at the feet of Gamaliel – the most renowned and respected rabbi of that age.

If you remember when Hosea was here several weeks ago he spoke of also receiving a similar education with the result that he became consumed by the idea of righteousness and burned with the fire of indignation against the idolatry of his people. This also describes the Jewish Saul in his early manhood in Jerusalem. He joined the Pharisees, the most strict sect of the Jewish tradition who insisted that the Jewish faith must be kept pure by the strict observance of all the ancient laws and traditions. He became one of the group who was intent on the persecution of the new followers of the upstart, Jesus, whose message so threatened the power and authority of the Temple system that he had been executed.

Now one of the things we think we know best about Paul is his conversion story from the book of Acts - you remember: the bright light, the voice from heaven on the road to Damascus, Paul's blindness and subsequent healing and baptism by Ananias, a follower of Jesus in Damascus. Well, this story was not written by Paul, in fact it was not written until at least thirty years after Paul's death, and was written by the same author who wrote the Gospel according to Luke. We don't know the source of this story. Obviously it had some basis in fact, but it is highly dramatic and is told in hyperbolic terms.

What we do have is a description from Paul's own hand regarding his conversion. In his letter to the Galatians he says:

“For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was taught by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

Then after three years I did go up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days.

[Here we need to stop for a bit of explanation. Jesus had given the apostle who we remember as Peter, a nickname – his original name was Simon and Jesus called him the equivalent of our present name “Rocky,” Perhaps it was because Peter was as dense as a rock – it took forever for him to grasp a new idea, but when he had, he was also solid as a rock in the way he held his new belief. The Greek word for “rock” expressed in modern form is Cephas. The Aramaic word for rock expressed in its modern form is “Peter” Now to continue Paul's words.]

But I did not see any other apostle except James, the Lord's brother.

In what I am writing to you, in God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia...”

This is quite a different version of his conversion from the account in Acts. What we can reasonably deduce from this statement is that sometime during the time he was actively engaged in the persecution of the first Christians, he became convinced of the truth of the message of Jesus and of the harm that his persecution of Jesus' followers was doing. He insists that his experience was completely spiritual, and not based on anything taught by the followers of Jesus. He mentions going into Arabia, which was a desert region, perhaps to wrestle with his new-found faith as Jesus is said to have done after his own baptism. Apparently the conversion experience took a considerable time as he says that it was three full years before he finally went to Jerusalem - for only fifteen days - to speak with Peter and James, and afterward he returned to the regions of his birthplace where he taught his message in those synagogues in cities all over Asia Minor and Greece, convincing people to follow the teachings of Jesus.

In our lesson today we find Paul in prison in Rome. It is the final few months of his life and he realizes that, and although he has not given up hope of being released, it is highly unlikely that he will ever be able to return to his former ministry and to the people who heard his message and who he so dearly loves.

There is one other thing that we need to be aware of when we consider the epistles, or letters of Paul. There are thirteen letters attributed to Paul in the New Testament. Of these thirteen, only seven are considered to be products of Paul's own hand. The other six are written in his name and reflect much of his theological ideas, but they differ in style and vocabulary and were undoubtedly written under the custom of pseudonymous authorship, which allowed a well-known or respected person's name to be indicated as the source of the writing as long as it faithfully adhered to that person's ideas. Three of these epistles were quite obviously written long after Paul's death as they refer to conditions that did not arise among the churches until much later. Six of the authentic epistles of Paul are written to churches or groups of churches. Philemon is unique in that it is the only one of the seven that is addressed to an individual.

As we stated before, Paul is under arrest in Rome. Scholars believe that since he was a Roman citizen it is likely he was under house arrest, which would mean that he would be living in private quarters guarded by soldiers rather than a prison cell and would receive much more lenient treatment. He would be allowed visitors who might bring him things to make him more comfortable or who would provide companionship. He was allowed to write letters to the converts he so cared for in the fledgling churches he had established.

Over in the city of Colossae in Asia Minor, we find the second character of our story – Philemon. Philemon had been converted earlier under Paul's teaching and apparently there was a strong bond of affection between him and Paul. Philemon arrives in Colossae and becomes the leader of the congregation there, even hosting it in his own home. Philemon has a slave named Onesimus who is the third major character in our story.

Just a word about slavery in the first century – it was endemic in the culture and the morality of the concept was not questioned as it was much later in modern times. However, Jews were admonished to treat their slaves as servants, caring for their needs and treating them well.

Onesimus apparently has stolen something from his master, Philemon – we don't know what it was, maybe money, maybe goods. In any case he runs away. This is a serious offense for any slave because, if caught, the law allowed the master to punish the slave severely or even put her or him to death.

Ironically, Onesimus runs away to Rome and comes under Paul's influence. According to Paul's letter there was a very strong bond of affection between him and Onesimus and it seems Paul considered him as one would consider a son. Onesimus apparently was a great comfort to Paul, but his conversion presented a dilemma in their relationship. Both Paul and Onesimus knew that to be faithful to Jesus' teaching, Onesimus must return to Philemon and beg forgiveness and try to make restitution. Besides being a great risk for Onesimus in light of the treatment of runaway slaves, it also was heart-wrenching as Paul and Onesimus realized the likelihood that they would never see each other again, so Paul writes this letter to Philemon begging that he accept Onesimus back, not as a penitent slave, but as a lost brother.

There is a Greek word, kerygma, which means "kernel" or "core" and in Onesimus' decision to return to Philemon, we find the kerygma of this particular story. The entire Judeo-Christian story has the same kerygma – that of deliverance, return and acceptance.

Jesus often told stories with this same kerygma. Next Sunday's gospel lesson includes Luke's version of the story of the shepherd who has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost. He leaves the 99 in safety and goes searching for the lost sheep at the risk of great peril to himself.

When I was in my early teens my mother gave me a picture to hang on the wall of my room. Some of you may have seen it as the print was quite common at one time. It is a winter landscape with snow drifts and a blowing snowfall. In the foreground of the scene is a small lamb, curled up in the snow – obviously cold, lost and helpless. Over the lamb is a large Collie dog howling into the heavens. Of course the meaning of the picture was blatantly obvious – the noble dog was attempting to summon help for the dying lamb. However, in my somewhat twisted perception of things I decided my picture needed a caption, so the line I affixed beneath the picture was "Lassie, saying Grace." My mother was NOT amused! But my point is this: each one of us at sometime or other in our life has experienced or will experience the hopeless feeling of being lost and not having strength or courage to find our way home and without even a faithful dog to summon help for us. It is then that the Shepherd- perhaps in the person of a friend or mentor, or brother, or sister - miraculously finds us and carries us home to safety, warmth and healing.

Jesus also relates the story of the son who wheedles his inheritance from his father and goes far from home, wasting it all on frivolity and licentiousness until he is completely destitute and is forced to eat with the pigs. At rock bottom he finds the courage to swallow his pride and shame and return to his father who welcomes him with loving arms. We have all been that prodigal, wasting money and opportunities, rejecting love and helpfulness from family and friends, and running away into our own life of destitution. But the Master comes and helps us find the courage to face our problems and to find healing. This theme of deliverance, and return -- welcoming and forgiveness, is indeed the kerygma of the entire Judeo-Christian story.

Today's lesson does not tell us the outcome of Onesimus' return to Philemon. In light of Paul's none too subtle reminder of how much of Philemon's present status is due to his former relationship with Paul, we can only imagine that Onesimus was welcomed with open and forgiving arms.

One expression of this concept of return, welcome and forgiveness is expressed in a poem written about 90 years ago by Myra Brooks Welch.

'Twas battered and scarred and the auctioneer
Thought it scarcely worth his while
To waste much time on the old violin
But he held it up with a smile.
"What am I offered, good people?" he cried.
"Who'll start the bidding for me?
A dollar, a dollar and who'll make it two.
Two dollars and who'll make it three?
Three dollars once! Three dollars twice!
Going for three", but no,
From the back of the room a grey-haired man came forward and picked up the bow,
And wiping the dust from the old violin
And tight'ning the loosened strings
He played a melody pure and sweet
As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased and the auctioneer
In a voice that was quiet and low
Said, "What now am I bid for the old violin?"
And he held it up with the bow.
"A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two,
Two thousand, and who'll make it three?
Three thousand once, three thousand twice,
Going and gone!" said he.
And the people cheered, but some of them cried
"We don't quite understand,
What changed its worth? Swift came the reply
"'Twas the touch of a master's hand!"

So many a one with life out of tune
And battered and scarred by sin
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd
Much like the old violin.
A mess of pottage, a glass of wine,
A game and they travel on.
They're going once, and going twice,
They're going and almost gone.
But the Master comes and the heedless crowd
Can never quite understand
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought
By the touch of the Master's hand.

AMEN.