

## ***Sermon Text for July 2, 2017***

Colossians 1:13-14; Romans 6:17-23; Philemon

### **“Independence Day”**

by Holly Miller

This weekend, the sights and sounds of independence are ringing in our ears. Let's go to the Lord to ask Him to ring in His truth regarding freedom. *[O Lord of truth, and love and light. Shine upon us today and fill us with the spirit of your kingdom. Reveal yourself to us through these words and through the communion we share today. Thank you, Lord God.]*

There is a small book in the Bible that intrigues me - the Letter to Philemon, written by Paul, can be found on page 215 just before the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament in your pew Bible. You will want to keep it open because we will refer to it throughout the message this morning. This may be a book you've never considered. It consists of one chapter, 25 verses, but within the letter is a wealth of knowledge. Let's take a look.

The letter was written by the apostle Paul most likely while he was in prison in Rome about 60 A.D., probably at the same time that he wrote Colossians. Both letters were carried to Colosse by Onesimus and Tychicus. The first-named recipient is Philemon, a wealthy slave owner, brother in Christ, and leader of a house church in Colosse. However, there are other recipients: Apphia, likely the wife of Philemon, and Archippus, possibly their son; indeed, the whole church that meets in their house. While the Letter to Philemon is not a letter to be circulated among churches, we can see that it is not solely private, either. Though Paul never visited Colosse, he spent three years at nearby Ephesus, which might be the connection between Paul and Philemon, whom he calls his “dear friend and co-worker.”

Onesimus, a slave belonging to Philemon, has found his way to Paul in Rome, either sent by Philemon to aid Paul or more likely, as a runaway seeking refuge. Either way, this slave has now become a believer, thanks to the ministry of Paul, and has been serving Paul in prison - Paul, a good friend of the master from whom he likely escaped! The occasion of this letter is that Paul is sending Onesimus back to his master, along with the letter, as a plea to Philemon. Now we should know that slavery was a common institution in the Roman Empire where slaves were acknowledged to be persons, but economically disposed of as property. Roman law required that Paul return Onesimus to his master, with severe penalties if he did not. The question is asked: How could Paul send Onesimus back to his master and back to slavery, including possible punishment for running away and stealing from his

master? That punishment, according to Roman law, could be death. It is a good and valid question; perhaps we will gain some insight as we journey today.

The Letter to Philemon follows a common Greek structure intended to persuade the reader. Its major purpose is to persuade Philemon to do what Paul judges to be the right thing, so Paul pulls out all the stops. He writes with praise, tact, emotion, even lighthearted wordplay. Paul uses the greeting in vs. 1-3 to establish a common bond (“our”). In verses 4-7, Paul switches to “I” & “you,” writing with thanksgiving for and praise of Philemon. Paul ends these verses by calling Philemon, “my brother.”

In verses 8-17, Paul finally makes his appeal – “on the basis of love.” Paul reminds Philemon that he Paul is an old man & a prisoner for the Lord (as he states in verse 1). The theme of prisoner runs throughout the missive – vv. 1, 9, 10, 13, 16 and 23. The NIV renders v. 10 as “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.” Onesimus became his son when Paul brought him to new life in the gospel. Verse 11 is a delightful wordplay on the name “Onesimus” which means ‘useful’ or ‘beneficial.’ Previously, “Onesimus” was useless to his master, but now as a Christian brother, he is useful or beneficial. In vs. 12 Paul reiterates how much Onesimus means to him and then says that he wanted to keep him. But, vs. 14, he wants Philemon to act voluntarily. Maxie Dunnam puts it this way: “Paul is persuading Philemon to be obedient not to Paul, but to the gospel of love.” Verses 15 & 16 are the heart of the matter. “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 more than a slave, a beloved brother...” “Perhaps this is the reason” –is Paul indicating God’s providence may be at work? “Forever” - is this a reference to eternal life which Onesimus will now receive? Some scholars believe Paul is asking for the release of Onesimus; others, that Paul is asking Philemon to treat Onesimus as one who is in his new status of brother, without changing the worldly station of Onesimus, that of slave.

Verses 17-22 summarize Paul’s request that Philemon receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself. If anything is owed, Paul will pay it, though he “says nothing about” Philemon’s own spiritual obligation to Paul for bringing him to faith in Christ. He asks Philemon to “refresh his heart in Christ,” something Philemon was known for doing (v. 7). Then, in v. 21, Paul writes, “confident of your obedience...knowing that you will do even more than I say,” - could this be a subtle request to do more, to grant Onesimus his freedom? In verse 22, Paul lets Philemon know that he plans to visit if prayers are answered – is he sending a message that he will know how Philemon responds to his letter? Just before the blessing completes the letter, Paul sends greetings from five other co-workers in Christ, lending more of an audience to the request.

This is a letter of love to Philemon; it is also a challenge. Philemon was a Christian, a leader of a house church; Paul even credits him with refreshing the hearts of the saints. You would think Philemon had this transformation thing down, but Paul was pushing him one step farther. In light of all of that slavery entailed in that historical context, Paul was asking Philemon to recognize an additional element of transformation, to accept Onesimus, his runaway slave, as an equal, a brother in Christ. That recognition by Philemon, if he chooses to say yes to Paul, would usher in the transforming reality of Christ – it would serve as a living representation of the gospel – right before the eyes of the house church members and the brothers mentioned in the letter. What a transformation that could create! The fact that the letter written by Paul to Philemon was preserved and included in the canon of Scripture suggests that Philemon did indeed honor Paul's request.

How does Paul's letter challenge us today? Are we living as the transformed people that we are? Have we taken the gospel to heart, to our hearts? Is God pushing us to consider more as we work out God's kingdom reality, this new order, in our own new life in Christ? The new reality that rose with the dawn on Christ's resurrection day continues to spread across the sky of our world. Will we live as people of the resurrection – freed from the bonds of sin and enslaved to Christ?

Today, this day, we will celebrate communion, binding us to Christ and binding us to one another. Remember this: the runaway, Onesimus, is beyond hope in the eyes of Philemon, but...not in God's kingdom! Consider this quote: "We tend to reduce people to the worst thing they have done." It is not so in God's kingdom! In Christ, as redeemed people, as transformed people, we can see with God's kingdom eyes, we can think God's kingdom thoughts, and we can carry in our hearts the transformed reality of God's kingdom. We can do this! It takes practice, and desire, but we can be God's kingdom reality, helping others to see and understand God's new creation ushered in by His Son.

We are the lost children, the prodigal son, the runaway slave, but we are also the Philemons who serve our church and other people, but like Philemon, are being asked, pushed even, to consider and understand God's new reality. And if we are the runaways and the Philemons, are we not also the Pauls, who must remind one another what it means to be a child of God and to recognize God's work in others? No longer slaves to sin, we are enslaved to God and His righteousness. We are free from sin and death. Happy Independence Day!

I recently read an article, "Lessons from a Condemned Man's Last Meal" written by Jake Owensby, regarding convict Ledell Lee who ate his last meal on April 29 this year and was executed by

lethal injection at 11:44 that evening. For his last meal, Lee requested and received Holy Communion. When we walk forward today to receive our Holy Communion, we bring our lives – our entire lives – to Christ. Using Owenby's words, "in the past week or month or year or decade words have passed our lips that battered someone else's soul. We have been indifferent to suffering or resentful of another's success. We have let down friends, betrayed ourselves, cheated on taxes or spouses, put career before family, and thought ourselves better than someone else. And here we are. At the breaking of the bread. Taking Jesus at his word that he wants us here. To mingle his life with ours so that we can become who we truly are."<sup>1</sup>

As you dip your piece of the loaf into the shared cup today, remember that you are joined with each one who dips with you now and each one who has ever dipped before you and after you. You are joined in the suffering of Christ and you are joined in his victory and resurrection. Communion is participation in the life of God. You, as a part of the body of Christ, are joined with all others whenever and wherever they kneel to receive the Last Supper. That would include Liddell Lee. "We are all one in the story of grace," writes Owensby. He quotes Sr. Helen Prejean: "People are worth more than the worst thing they've ever done." Owensby adds, "People are worth the love that Christ pours into them." In 1993, Liddell Lee killed his neighbor Debra Reese when he stole \$300 from her. Three months ago, at the age of 51, Liddell "Lee made the Last Supper his last meal." When he knelt on the cold, hard floor for that Holy Communion, "all the company of heaven...gathered with him in his cell. And so did we, whether we realized it or not."

Paul's desire was to share the new reality ushered in by Christ's life, death and resurrection – a reality that transcends slavery – the love of Christ, the grace and mercy of Christ extended to the least worthy (Paul would say, to himself). In gratitude, Paul then extends that love to Onesimus and appeals to Philemon to do the same, to demonstrate to the entire house church this new order of life in which a slave becomes a brother in Christ – a member of Christ's body – and totally free (from the servitude of sin and the finality of death). Independence Day. We, too, share in the celebration of independence – discovered when we call ourselves, as Paul did, slaves of Christ. Today, here, in communion, we can experience a tangible representation of the love of Christ extended to us as individuals, and to us as His body, as brothers and sisters in Christ. Thanks be to God!

*[Almighty One, may we know the joy of being obedient slaves to Christ, of doing more than we are asked, of refreshing the hearts of others as we have been refreshed, redeemed and restored by you. Thank you for your precious gift of grace that gives us freedom. Amen.]*

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<sup>1</sup>Owensby, Jake, “*Lessons from a Condemned Man’s Last Meal.*” posted 5/18/17 on *Ministry Matters*. Originally appeared on the author’s blog.