

Sermon Text for July 6, 2025

By Guest Minister Jen Eisenberg

“Christian Freedom”

Matthew 28:16-20

Philemon 1:4-12

Core Affirmation: Because Christ has captured Paul as a prisoner of the gospel, Philemon- and all Christians- are free *to* love others faithfully, rather than live freed *from* something.

When I was in 3rd grade, my mom was my Girl Scouts troop leader. She invited a high school exchange student from Sweden to come to one of our meetings. The girls in the troop prepared and we decided to ask her, Are you free? This poor exchange student. Despite being fluent in English, she stared at us, not comprehending our question. For our part, we were obsessed with freedom as an ideal of democracy and, as third graders, we were ignorant of where and how it thrived.

This weekend we celebrated the 249th birthday of the American declaration of independence from Great Britain,
Many of us with hot dogs, sparklers and family.
We associate this political independence from Great Britain with our freedom.

Of course, our Christian freedom does not come from our American freedom.
If anything, our American freedoms are derived from a Christian theology of what it means to be human and to worship the God who sent Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to claim us as His own.

There is a very short letter in the New Testament.

I've only heard it taught one time in my life.

But, there's a good story behind it.

One worth hearing.

I wonder if you are familiar with the story of the slave owner Philemon?

Show of hands?

Pray for illumination and hope.

Our second reading this morning comes from a short letter from Paul written to three named people and the church in which they worshipped.

Paul first addresses Philemon.

It is widely assumed when the letter says,

I thank my God always when I mention YOU in the singular,

Paul is speaking to Philemon, while in earshot of his wife, friend and the entire Colossian church.

This is a public letter to an individual person.

Philemon was a slave owner.

His slave, Onesimus, has gotten to know Paul while he is in prison and he became a Christ follower.

After coming to faith and being discipled by Paul, he sent Onesimus back to Philemon.

Paul sent Onesimus with this letter, asking for his release from slavery and to embrace him as brother.

Can you imagine what courage it took for Onesimus to return?

Can you imagine what humility it required of Philemon to receive the work of God in Onesimus?

Let's hear what Paul said:

Read Philemon 4-12

It might help to know a little bit about slavery in the first century, because it is quite different than the two other slave societies we know (the American slave system and the current human trafficking crisis the world is experiencing today)

A slave society is one where 30% of population is a slave. In first century Rome, that was about 2.3m people.

A hundred years before Jesus, there were no slaves in Rome.

How did this come to be?

Roman elites wanted to increase their land holdings- which required war.

The native workforce was conscripted to fight those wars, causing labor shortages.

Then, massive numbers of captured persons were brought back to supply the labor demand.

People also became slaves to pay off debt

People who were abandoned as infants would find themselves in families as slaves

Another important thing to know about Roman slavery is that

despite their economic dependence on enslaved labor, Rome embraced something of a process, rather than a rigid social institution.

That is,

Romans freely emancipated slaves.

In fact, they were so eager to release slaves that just after Jesus' birth, Caesar Augustus enacted a law prohibiting emancipation before the age of 30.

Slavery was a mechanism- albeit not a very good one- for upward mobility.

Slaves could become highly skilled, even attaining powerful posts in the government.

The United States is no longer a slave society.

But, today, we do face challenges which require us to rely on God's eternal wisdom.

On Thursday night, a group of us learned about the work of CWS and the free Pa Immigration Law Clinic held weekly in a Lancaster church.

There are a lot of people moving about the world today, as a result of war and greed.

They are not enslaved.

We call them refugees and asylum seekers.

The numbers are staggering.

The systems that track and care for refugees and asylum seekers are utterly overwhelmed, and our ability, as a nation, to discern a way forward is nearly shut down.

What does God's freedom look like- to Paul and to us?

Make no mistake about the goal of Paul's letter.

He pulls out all the stops to secure God's work in Onesimus within the Body of Christ at Colossae.

That is, to secure Onesimus' freedom to live as a treasured child of our One Father.

How does Paul secure Onesimus' new status which, verse 20 says, is as brother in the flesh and in the Lord.

Paul will not stand for any spiritual gaslighting.

Paul will not stand for human enslavement in the spiritual family.

Paul goes all out to secure freedom in body and soul.

Paul uses many, many rhetorical means to influence Philemon.

He lays it on thick!

This morning, I'll point out one central thing Paul writes,
In part because it describes Christian freedom beautifully.

In verse 5, Paul prepares Philemon by reminding him who he is.
He calls out Philemon's love for all the saints and faith toward Jesus Christ.

Philemon's reputation is that he does not hold back the love.
He loves everyone- the Jew, the gentile, the rich, the poor-
That is how he's known. At least, to Paul.
He's also got a reputation as being faithful, courageous and loyal to King Jesus
and his ways.
It seems he has been acting according to the will of God.

Even Paul has experienced much joy and encouragement from Philemon's
love (v7). And so, Paul prays "Philemon's faith becomes effective" (v.6)

Next, Paul looks to make his request.
In verse 9, he writes, "I appeal to you on the basis of love"
This love that Philemon is known for... well, it's time to make it real.
Paul calls Philemon to act in love and change the way he relates to Onesimus.

Verses 8 and 14, Paul refuses to command or to force Philemon to do
anything.
Paul freely trusts Philemon to choose love, not gain.
Paul, imprisoned by Christ, gives Philemon the freedom to choose his way
forward.
Paul will not imprison Philemon forcing him to release Onesimus
but invites, implores, begs, convinces... him
To bind himself to the Gospel of Love.
Paul really believes what he wrote to the Galatian church:
"It was for freedom that Christ set us free"

And what about our enslaved brother? How is Paul's tactic working for him?
Onesimus, who had been bound by Philemon, has made the momentous
decision to surrender himself to Christ.
Amazingly, his life in Christ, seems to allow him the freedom to trust
Philemon's decision making.
So, even though he returns to the Colossian church and Philemon as a slave,
he must also hope to be received as a brother.

See, Onesimus has come to faith- not as a concept, but as a way of living. Faith in Christ does not instantly free him *from* the domination of Philemon but frees him *for* a loving partnership with him. This- this vulnerability- is why Paul puts so much pressure on Philemon to act with the love of the Father.

(Phew!)

The implications of Onesimus' transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit are far reaching.

Everyone in this story suddenly finds themselves on a journey of faith...

They are being re-shaped by the work of Christ.

A mentor used to say to me, The School of the Holy Spirit is always in session.

God is in the business of facilitating a work of becoming.

It is like a domino game or a chemistry experiment:

One dramatic change catalyzes movement toward God in others.

Paul is also becoming more:

he has become a father to Onesimus, calling him "his own heart" (v12).

Onesimus, his son.

Onesimus is becoming more.

He was once useless,

Now, he is useful to both Philemon, to Paul and to the ministry of the Gospel.

Onesimus is becoming, not only a Son and a brother,

But he is on his way to becoming a partner.

In verse 17, which we did not read, Paul urges Philemon to receive him as if he were receiving Paul- as a partner in the Gospel.

(This is why some think Philemon was a pastor in the Colossian church.)

Some say this letter to Philemon is included in the NT

Because Philemon also on a journey of becoming more:

Of course, we do not have record of his response to Paul's request.

But, some read the inclusion of this letter as a sign

that God also worked in Philemon and made his faith effective.

And he freed his slave to become a brother and servant to the Gospel of righteousness.

And that such movements were normative in the early church, if not the broader Roman empire.

Later, as we prepare for communion, we will pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Paul and Philemon and Onesimus tell a story of God's will being done on earth as in heaven.

And now, we are invited to participate in their story, in our time.

Paul is often criticized for not calling for an end to the institution of slavery. I get it.

There are ways I prefer he had condemned the practice too.

Instead, he wrote a letter and sent a converted slave.

What are we to do with this approach?

This is a HARD word for people caught in others' domination systems.

What I know...

Is that when I've been caught up in other's demands on my life,

A single story has been enough for me

A single story is enough to move me into faithful action.

We can live on Stories that remind us that God can and does restore lives

Stories that rehearse the times when people share hope shared and belonging

They are not nothing.

And, as someone who holds social and political power in some situations,

When I have submitted myself to God's way

in order to share freedom

in order to share dignity and love

It makes a difference- and

Remembering these stories does a lot to keep me going in bleak situations.

A single story of trust being forged has the power to be enough,

To fuel our efforts to face the challenges of our day,

To feed us our daily bread.

Recently, I heard David French, a Christian legal scholar, describe the way freedom became embedded in our culture.

First, a moral theology emerged: the Declaration of Independence.

Then, the morals were codified into laws.

Finally, the law was challenged and survived judicial testing.

Stories are our lived moral theology.

We can- should- ought to

Make stories of faith and Christian freedom for ourselves and others.

Let's rehearse- remind- and tell stories of faith and Christian freedom so we can endure together in love.

Pray and transition to Communion