

Proper 18 – 15 Pentecost – Year C – September 5, 2010
Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33
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On a beach thousands of miles from this place, there is a tiny rock. It is almost harmless now -- smoothed, worn, and weathered by time and tide. Today it is still the cause of a few spills and tumbles, the occasional stubbed toe and muttered curse. The rock wasn't always so small. Years ago, it was the proud proclamation of foundational bedrock. A prophetic finger of granite, with a sharp-edged tongue mirroring the boldness of the children, including myself and my brothers who climbed across its jagged back. We stood astride the rock asserting our defiance in the face of the mighty waters of the sea that twice daily charged its steadfast ramparts. As the sea swept in, we are not so brave after all, and often jumped down at the last possible instant, running and screaming from the freezing waters of the North Sea. The water always seemed unbelievably powerful and threatening as it roared its arrival and departure. It was and is like the voice of a master, one who has complete control of their realm. Perhaps for Onesimus it is akin to the voice of Philemon, and the rage that may well have dogged his tracks as he fled to Paul in great fear and trembling.

The name Onesimus means "useful one" in Greek. Probably why Paul's letter refers to how useful Onesimus has been to him in prison, even though he was useless to Philemon. Without judgment, Paul has adopted Onesimus as a child of God. Under Paul's tender and scrupulous care and instruction, Onesimus has succumbed to the voice of the Living Water, the gentle and all-powerful voice of God. He is now Paul and Philemon's brother in Christ. The bonds of Christian kinship parallel blood ties with deep and profound consequences in relationships. For example, in a society that was awash with gaining honor and avoiding shame, it was indeed shameful to enslave a brother or sister.

What then is Paul to do with the runaway slave of a wealthy benefactor of the early church? Paul's dilemma is more than just about the ethics of enslavement, as important as that issue is. It is in part a question of community and hospitality in Christ. In addition, it is also a question of living out the gritty realities and demands of Christian discipleship, where reconciliation is our mission. Christ came that we may all be reconciled to God in Him and through Him, and, as the Body of Christ draw others to God. In this case, the implications of Onesimus' new kinship to Paul and Philemon as a brother in Christ, may well cost Philemon both socially and economically. Although Paul will not demand it, he recommends that Philemon as the stronger party, release Onesimus, his slave from bondage. Just as the grace of our Lord Jesus, releases each believer from enslavement to sin and the bondage of death.

Interestingly, Paul does not comment on keeping slaves. In first century Palestine, the whole system of slavery was very different from our more recent experiences and understanding. Often slavery was a matter of indentured servitude, entered into willingly to repay a debt. Although abuses were not uncommon, especially against women, Onesimus' servitude was not the violent and oppressive images of slavery that we associate with more modern times. In the first century, enslavement was not usually a life sentence affecting an entire family, or even an entire ethnic group of people under duress. So what was Paul saying in his letter to Philemon and the church in his house? Paul takes great care to let Philemon know that he is sending Onesimus back to him. Paul also takes great care to let Philemon know what kind of reception Onesimus should receive as a blessed brother in Christ, and how Onesimus has served Paul during his absence from Philemon.

There is seemingly no question that Onesimus must continue to serve Philemon, but there is the question of how that relationship will play out in practical terms. More particularly, Paul is gently suggesting that the inherent inequality of a slave versus master relationship must be moderated through the teachings of the Gospel. The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus must also be moderated through Philemon's personal responsibility to embody the life and practices of a follower of Christ. For his part, Onesimus must also bear the responsibility of faithfully living out his relationship as Philemon's brother in Christ. Meaning that whatever the specific circumstances that prompted his initial flight, he has now, in all likelihood, run

away for the last time. Chief among these new lenses through which Philemon must look at Onesimus are Jesus' teachings associated with forgiveness, restoration, and reconciliation.

From chapter 17 of Luke's Gospel (17:3) we learn about forgiveness and restoration of right relationships: "Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive." We have all learned the Lord's Prayer, where Jesus taught his disciples to say, "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Or the words from Colossians chapter 3 (3:13) "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body." Second Corinthians chapter 5 (5:18) provides Paul's take on reconciliation and the importance God places on that ministry for all Christians in these words: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation".

So where does the sea meet the shore for us today? Let's face it, we probably don't have purely analogous situations in most of our lives. While most of don't have 'servants' in our employ, some of us do have someone who cooks or cleans for us, or does some handiwork around our homes – at least from time to time. It is hinted at in the letter that Onesimus has stolen from Philemon. He probably confessed this to Paul, because Paul asks Philemon to charge all wrongs to his own account. If we find that someone we hire to work in our homes steals from us -- in any definition of the word – including not doing the service we are paying for, how would we react? We too are invited to examine our own actions in all circumstances through the clear lens of our fellowship in Christ's Body, and God's commandments. There is no easy solution, but before we pursue a legal case, perhaps it would serve us well to seek restorative justice, giving the party an opportunity to make up, pay back or give back whatever is missing. Or maybe we would be inclined to forgive the debt, and try to understand the need or desperation behind the act, if that is the case.

It is clear that Philemon has been wronged. However, Paul is exhorting him to take the high road. Paul is asking Philemon to live out God's grace in action, as a model of Christian love, forgiveness, restoration and reconciliation. Curiously, Paul also tells Philemon that if he responds positively to his request it will be to Paul like rest and refreshment for his heart. It seems that knowing the peace of God in Christ Jesus, is more than simply accepting God's gift. It is love in action that brings us to a place of joy, refreshment, and rest in Christ.

As we open our hearts, the powerful and cleansing force of Living Water in Christ Jesus becomes the wellspring of love in our own relationships. By God's grace, we do our best to live in the full knowledge and obedience of the gifts we have received in Him. That is, the gift of reconciliation to God, the gift of forgiveness of our own debts, and the gifts of healing and new life in Christ. We have the gift of freedom in Christ. Let's not let our fear wash away that freedom.

On a beach thousands of miles from here, there is a sliver of rock that used to be a mighty finger of granite. The sea's tides continue to come and go, push and pull, constantly doing their work on that rock. They have smoothed and diminished that cold, hard granite scattering its pieces – a few tiny grains at a time – to mix with the millions of grains of sand on the beach. Like Paul, Philemon, Onesimus and all the saints, our faith is lived out in relationship with one another, by the power of Living Water flowing through us to strengthen and refresh us for the work God has given us to do. To paraphrase poet, John Donne, we are not islands, because we can never be complete in and of ourselves. We need Christ, and we need one another.

Amen.