

My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our minds, hearts, bodies, and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

As I prefaced in our call to worship, we are a people of identity, and we carry many of these in our minds and hearts. I'm not talking about the roles we take on; we've discussed that many times, how we mistake who we are for what we do. No, this is more fundamental. And it's so much more than where we come from, no matter how many generations back, right? My ancestry.com profile says that for quite a few generations back, I'm from Northern Europe. But we know that's not the end of the story, either, because we know that we all came from Africa if we go back more generations. Archeologists say it's only about 650 generations, to be exact, some 50,000 years ago that Homo Sapiens wandered out into a very wide world and, well, here we all are. 650 is not a very big number at all. But that still doesn't answer the fundamental question of meaning...who are we and who are we meant to be, even in the 650<sup>th</sup> generation?

I kind of wish every book of the Bible was as small and succinct as Philemon. I mean, there are 66 books of the Bible; how many of us can actually say that we have sat down and read, word for word, verse by verse, even one book of the Bible? Yeah, thank you, now you can say that, we've all read the one-pager, Philemon. Heck, it's less than that, look it up, page 1090 of our pew Bible.

We would do well to read, actually read, the words of our Biblical text, so I'm glad we have done that together this morning, cuz this one starts off with a bang. Paul, our great first missionary, says he is a prisoner of Christ, and...wait, what? Hold on here. That prisoner thing sounds we're in jail or something, like we don't have any choices and we're always being told what to do. I always thought that we were freed by Christ. Well, think of it like this. Jesus tells us in the Gospel that we are to love God with all our heart, minds, soul, Spirit, right? OK, so that's a commitment that requires us to be all in, for whatever we have to do to meet that, and whatever the world will donkey kick back for us making that promise. It means doing the compassionate thing, the just thing, the merciful thing. What the world hates, God loves, right?

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So when we're in a relationship that requires us to have the world mock us and laugh at us, and it looks to the world as if we have no choices that will satisfy earthly cravings, those things that are selfish and not selfless.

So yeah, I guess Paul uses that language to remind us that we have a covenantal, everlasting relationship with God that can never be broken or forsaken. When we commit to **God**, we are stuck. No goin' back, and this God will never let us go. So I guess, in that sense, we are indeed prisoners. But we, with God, get a freedom from what the world wants of us, demands of us, and indeed assigns to us as to who, what, and how we should be.

We can live differently. Deeply. Richly. Wonderfully.

Sounds like freedom, doesn't it? Like all things Biblical, it's a bit paradoxical. Become free by being a prisoner. Lose your life to gain it. The first will be the last and the last will be first. God shakes us up that way.

I told you this little book of less than a page was a blockbuster. And we're only halfway through the first sentence. Ready to continue? Let's get the basics down.

Like all things in the Bible and the Gospel, we could spend hours on just a few words, but we might be then missing the larger point and context of the content. Philemon is a wealthy patron of the early Christian church in Colossae, married to his wife, Apphia, and they have a son Achippus, all mentioned in the letter's intro. Paul had never been to Colossae, so Philemon and his family probably had traveled to Ephesus at one point and encountered Paul while he was doing his 5- year tour there establishing a mission and school. Onesimus is a runaway slave from Philemon's household, and probably knew of Paul from the family talking about him, and he maybe sought out Paul for help and converted.

And here begins the context and point of the letter. There is a redeeming love of Christ which transforms. We know this. But now we see it. Paul, the greatest of the Christians at the time, calls Onesimus alternatively, his son, his brother in Christ, and indeed, his own heart.

And Paul is now exhorting his well-to-do friend, Philemon, to look at things beyond the social status of the times. Paul says, "forget about your money, status,

and indeed what might have even happened between you and Onesimus. Welcome him back as you would any other Christian of Christ. Be of the heart that Christ taught us. Be humble, merciful, just, compassionate, and above all else, welcome Onesimus in the Spirit of Love that we have been shown by Christ and which I would show you if the shoe were on the other foot.”

In the ancient world, this is shocking stuff. Forget about how the world works? Philemon is thinking, “OK, hold on here. Forget that Onesimus ran away, he’s in the wrong, maybe even taken some stuff from me, and not only am I supposed to take him back but WELCOME HIM? What would this show the rest of the household, that they can do whatever they want and there are no consequences? Paul, are you kidding me? We have rules, laws, and customs here. We can’t just welcome anyone given all that has happened.”

It’s a big ask, I’ll grant you that. But it’s the most fundamental ask in all of the Epistles, and it applies directly to our modern world right here, right now. Think of it this way as we think newly about neighbors this fall.

We live in a nation that has rules, laws, and customs. Yet we have for some time, long before even the Syrian Civil War crisis, folks that are running away from circumstances and don't know where to turn, but they heard that they can come here for refuge and relief. We welcomed Cubans thrown off their island in the 80s, Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians under threat of death in the 70s, Europeans fleeing fascism in the 30s and 40s, and any number of poor and hungry in the run-up to and following World War I from 1890-1920.

We are a nation that has rules, laws, and customs. And none of these groups were welcomed. We were suspicious of them and what it would mean bringing a different language and culture and religion. But they came here—as we all did—we are all immigrants in the U.S., after all—and we found we could help them until they could find their way again. Sometimes to go home, sometimes to stay. But we took them in, because it was the compassionate, just, merciful, and loving thing to do.

The Bible is a repository of personal stories that apply way beyond personal experiences. We are called

as individuals, as groups, as a church, as a community, and beyond to do what is right. Not treating one another as slave or free, rich or poor, but all equal and valuable in the eyes of God. Valued lives that deserve, again and again, a compassionate and merciful chance.

And yet we have Philemon in the back of our brains, as we hear on the nightly news each day, “But we are a nation of rules, laws, and customs. Let’s not forget that”.

A vexing dichotomy isn’t it? So what our response, people of TCC, when Onesimus shows up on our doorstep? Who are we, and will the person in need be welcomed as Christ loves, or stiff-armed as Philemon has every right to do so by our rules, laws, and customs?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts. 650 generations ago we wandered out of Africa, and we’ve been wandering ever since. Politics, economies, and social strata are artificial barriers we create for ourselves to be exclusive, not inclusive. Not of God, but ways for us to differentiate and feel just a little bit better about ourselves than whomever we encounter, because we know we are the safe ones with our rules, laws, and

customs, and whomever doesn't hew to those or understand them is alien and dangerous.

But we too were once aliens in the land of Egypt, and God says to welcome them. My forebears too, were aliens fleeing persecution and found their way to Northern Illinois from Northern Europe and they were...well...not exactly welcomed but kicked to the frontier on a make-or-break existence. But they stayed. And that lesson has never been lost on me. Each of us is the son or daughter of one seeking a new start and life, and we don't have to go very far back through our history of generations to find that one where we were the one persecuted, hiding, running, and in need of help.

How lucky then were we in finding refuge, right here, right now, in this holy place, amongst one another? And more importantly, how do we prepare our own hearts and those we encounter to be equal, valued children of God in all that we see, and do and pray for? The choice is ours, each day, in how we live our lives. We don't know how the story of Onesimus ends. I like to err on the side of mercy. How bout you? TBTG, Amen.