

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd  
Pentecost 13  
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## **From Slave to Brother Philemon**

Biblical scholars remind us that when we study Paul, we are reading someone else's mail. Paul never intended for people in some place called the United States to read his letters in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our job when we read them is to see how we are in some way Corinthians, or Galatians or Thessalonians. We aren't exactly like them, but what's the connection?

We find special difficulties with all of that in the letter to Philemon. We find identifying with the recipient of this letter, Philemon, hard and strange. More importantly, we can only surmise what went on behind the scenes of this letter. We have here a personal letter from Paul to one man, about one matter. Yet, the folks who compiled the New Testament thought this letter should be considered sacred scripture. What did they see in it?

Let's try as best we can to reconstruct the events behind the letter. Paul languishes in prison, perhaps in Philippi or Caesarea, but we cannot say for certain. As we know, Paul spent much time in prison and used his time there to write. At least we benefit from his suffering, because, without Paul's time in prison, we might not have such epistles as Philippians, with its inspiring words about Jesus taking on the form of a slave.

Imprisonment seems to have deepened Paul's commitment to and identification with Christ. In prison, Paul shed everything else to depend on God.

Somehow, during this particular imprisonment, Paul encounters a runaway slave named Onesimus, a name that means "useful." Paul leads Onesimus to convert to Christ. Here comes the big question: What should Onesimus do now that he has become a Christian? We don't know how much Paul agonized over this decision or how he explains it to Onesimus. We know only that although Paul wants to keep Onesimus with him, his final decision is to send the slave back to his master, Philemon, who we gather was a follower of Jesus and known to Paul.

Once Onesimus gets back to Philemon, the slave's fate is up to the master. We can assume that Philemon is angry that Onesimus ran away. Paul even suggests in verse 18 that Onesimus might have done some harm or stolen something from Philemon. Paul is sending a powerless slave back to an angry master. Philemon had almost no limits in what he could do to Onesimus.

The master could legally torture him, or send him to work in the salt mines, or even have him crucified. Why would Paul send Onesimus back to such a possibility?

Paul sent the slave back to the master as an act of faith. Paul saw an opportunity for reconciliation, for Philemon to grow in his understanding of what it means to be a Christian. So, Paul asked Onesimus to go back to his master, to step out with God for who knows what? “Oh, and by the way, take this letter with you.”

In the letter, Paul, who has led Onesimus to Christ, wants to lead Philemon to a deeper understanding of Christ. Now that Onesimus has become a believer in Christ, everything has changed. To the world, a master was a master and a slave was a slave — that’s the way it was. In the church, looking through Christian eyes, a slave and a master were brothers in the Lord. That kind of upsets the apple cart!

The person of the lowest rank — with no status, no power, no rights — is now your brother. Here’s the remarkable thing about this letter: Paul doesn’t tell Philemon exactly what to do with Onesimus. Paul doesn’t say, “Now be sure not to punish him,” or “You know, you could set him free.” All that Paul says is, “Because of Christ, he is now your brother.”

Paul simply seems to want that new idea to get under Philemon’s skin. Paul doesn’t start with the institution of slavery. He seems simply to hold out a radical idea, hoping that his words will challenge Philemon to examine his faith.

When Paul sends this letter, he's acting in faith on three levels. First, he's trusting Onesimus, who had already run away once, to carry the letter to his master and not run off again. Second, he's trusting Philemon, who might punish Onesimus before he even reads the letter, to understand what it means to be Christ-like. Third, he's trusting God that somehow this will all work out to some good end.

We might consider it remarkable that Paul wrote the letter, but even more remarkable that the letter found its way through the years so that we can read it. We might have expected Onesimus to head in the opposite direction and use this letter to start a campfire to keep himself warm. We might have expected Philemon to read the letter, then wad it up and toss it into file 13. Paul wrote this letter to one man, yet somehow it survived. Churches have read and reread Paul's letter out loud.

This powerful, important, miraculous letter leaves open the question of what it means to call one another "brother and sister in the Lord." To call one another "brother and sister in Christ" sounds easy, but as we see from the letter, that simple act reaches far and wide.

We can push the question even further. If we ask how this letter might matter to the contemporary church, where would we look? I want to suggest that we can find an analogy in immigrants to the United States.

Paul's radical message to Philemon might help us think in Christian ways about one of the hot-button topics for the contemporary church: What does it mean to call one another "brother and sister" when it comes to our country's immigration policy?

I hesitate to preach about that, not because I want to shy away from controversy but because I don't have the answers. We might insist that immigrants should obey the law. Without law we have chaos. But, if Philemon had obeyed just the law, he would have punished Onesimus.

In a way similar to Paul's exhorting Philemon to consider Onesimus a brother, might we look at the desperate people who survive brutally harsh conditions to reach our border as brothers and sisters? Can we look into the sad eyes of those who don't look like us and see a child of God? Can our hearts ache for their pain, fear, and uncertainty the way our hearts would ache for a member of our own family? Being a brother to Onesimus pushed Philemon places he didn't want to go. We may wish that the problems with immigration would simply disappear. We may wish that people from other countries would just stay home. Paul, writing from the discomfort and hardship of a prison, calls us to look with new eyes. Paul does not give us policy. Paul does not solve all the complications we face on our borders. Paul does not tell Philemon exactly what to do either. He simply tells Philemon to love Onesimus as a brother and go from there.

How should we write our laws? Paul doesn't tell us. Paul calls us to take Christian love seriously. Paul calls us to look at those on our borders as brothers and sisters and go from there. What might that mean? We don't know, but Paul stepped out in faith to write this letter and send it to Philemon.

Paul stepped out in faith, not knowing what exactly would happen. We don't know where our ministries will take us. Paul never expected that we would be reading an English translation of this letter. What will happen when we step out in faith? We don't know, but we know that God loves every immigrant just as God loves us. God sees their pain and anguish just as God sees our struggles.

So, how do we act in love? How do we respond in faith to those coming to our borders? We might not have answers for all the questions. Paul tells us to love and trust. See the immigrant as a brother or sister. Take some risks. Step out in faith and see what God will do. God can take something small, like a letter, and use it for things we could never imagine. God can take our love for the stranger and build new community, bring new hope, break down barriers. We turn our love and trust over to God and wait to see what God will do. (2)