

**“Learning from a Snapshot of Christian Community”**

**Philemon 1:1-21**

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There are many benefits to participating in the life of a church that is over 207 years old. For one thing, we worship in a museum - a magnificent, awe-inspiring museum. We also have a rich history, one that is irrevocably intertwined with the history of this community and nation. And one of the most fascinating illustrations of this reality is the church clerk’s entry in the official church records on April 13, 1865.

Unlike other entries, this one has nothing to do with church business. It is a brief, first-person account of Sherman’s troops entering Raleigh. “This morning,” the clerk writes, “just before the rising of the sun, General W. T. Sherman at the head of a hundred and thirty thousand Federal soldiers entered the city of Raleigh; the city having been surrendered to him by the authorities.” The clerk goes on to say that “little violence was offered by the citizens though all houses were seized and every kind of firearm was confiscated.”

It is a fascinating entry, a first-person account which documents not only the details of the event but the emotions of the people, the fear and sadness they felt. It does not tell us everything about that time, but it gives us a glimpse of reality, a snapshot of life during the war, and a bit later in the entry, a sense of how the church functioned then.

The text we have read from Philemon provides a similar glimpse into life in the first century, a snapshot of Christian community in its early days. It cannot tell us everything because it is so brief. In fact, it is the Apostle Paul’s shortest letter, only 335 words in the Greek; some of his sentences seem longer! Some have questioned its place in the canon not only because of its brevity but because of its personal nature - it includes no overt theological reflection. But the letter offers insight into the nature of Christian community, a snapshot from which we can learn. It says that all are one in the body of Christ, there is no room for hierarchy, there is only level ground before the cross.

But before we consider the letter's insights, we need to address not the elephant but the T-Rex in room, the source of much debate about this biblical book – what it says and does not say about slavery. We would love to find a clear word of judgment about slavery as an institution either here or somewhere in scripture, and here would be nice since Paul is writing to a slave owner about a slave.

But while scripture as a whole, interpreted wisely, has plenty to say about slavery, we need to be careful about judging other times by our values and understandings. How will future generations regard our values and behavior on matters such as race relations, climate change, gun violence, sexuality, human trafficking, opiate addiction, mental health, etc.? We are not likely to fare very well.

It is important to understand today's reading in context, not make excuses, but see what Paul's words mean in his time. To do this we need to appreciate the similarities and differences between slavery in the Roman Empire and in this nation in past centuries. In the Roman Empire, slavery is not based on race; slaves *can* hold responsible positions, own property and look forward to possible manumission. But there is no guarantee of these things, slaves are still treated as less than human and are subject to cruel treatment and extreme punishment.

One scholar notes that to consider ancient Greco-Roman slavery as kinder and gentler than American slavery in the antebellum South “may be akin to comparing reported prison conditions in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba to the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. One is dealing here with different shades of the bleak and the bad (Todd D. Still, *Philippians and Philemon*, Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary, p. 159).”

So, the slavery we are talking about is different, but it is still slavery, and it is part of Roman life. Paul is willing to take risks for his beliefs – he is in prison because of them – so we might wonder why he doesn't go further than he does in challenging slavery. But Paul is not in a position to change the structure of Roman culture, even if he wants to, and he does go pretty far in what he asks the slave owner, Philemon, to do. He asks him not to hold anything against the slave, Onesimus, and to treat him not as a slave but as a brother in Christ. He does not explicitly tell him to free Onesimus, but he seems to imply as much.

Apparently Onesimus has become a Christian while he has been with Paul. Paul argues that because he has, his status as a brother in Christ transcends any other reality, even the distinction of slave or free. This echoes what he says to the Galatians – there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). So, for all practical purposes, Paul is doing away with slavery within Christian community, which is a big deal in this time. He is saying there are to be no distinctions between us. There is only level ground before the cross.

We might wonder why he doesn't insist that Philemon follow his command, rather than simply appealing to him on the basis of love and throwing in the tear-jerking phrase – as an old man and a prisoner for Christ. The reason is that no distinctions means no distinctions; level ground means level ground; Paul cannot claim to do away with hierarchy while claiming a place of privilege and authority for himself.

So, while he is addressing one specific issue here – slavery – he is painting an image of church that has much broader implications, an image of a community where all are equal partners.

It is an image we embrace, at least in concept, but it is something the church has struggled to live up to from the very beginning. The first deacons in Acts 6 are appointed because not everyone is being cared for equally. The Hellenists complain that their widows are being neglected in the distribution of food while the Hebrews' widows are not. They are all equal, but some are more equal than others.

This church was founded by fourteen members of African descent and nine of European descent. We began as a biracial church, but we were not all equal. While we have had female deacons for well over a hundred years and ordained women for a long time, many churches to this day do not treat women as equal partners. And there are many other aspects of life that shape the way we are viewed – the amount of money we are perceived to have and give to the church, how long we have lived in a community and been part of a church, whether we are in whatever group that has more influence at any given time. Every voice matters, but some voices seem to matter more than others. This is not the way it should be, but it is often the way it is.

So, how do we address the disparity between the kind of community we are called to be and the kind of community we are? In part, we lean into grace and realize the church has always struggled. The beloved community is a future hope, it has never been realized. But we are called to do more than throw up our hands in despair and say – we are only human. We are called to pursue this kind of community.

Perhaps there are things we can learn from history. I think of the baptismal practices of the fourth century, shaped by church leaders like John Chrysostom. These practices were more involved than ours as candidates prepared for months, sometimes years, to enter the body of Christ. Preparation involved the study of texts and the forming of the spirit, and each candidate had a mentor who could come from any walk of life. A poorer person could mentor a wealthier one as all approached baptism as equal partners. This was ingrained in new believers.

One remnant of this process is the habit of calling each candidate *brother* or *sister*. When I baptized Ian and Margaret, I referred to them as my brother and sister, underscoring the nature of our relationship in the body of Christ, though I did remind them I would still be their father... But we are all on level ground before the cross. Perhaps if we affirm this reality from the beginning, we might make more progress.

In his book *The Struggle to Be Free* Wayne Oates said this.

The Word of God, the Logos, the person of Jesus Christ, was my redemption from feelings of inferiority. From then on I felt it a divine imperative never to think of any human being as inferior to me, nor, at the same time, to think of any human being as superior to me. From then on I began to look *across* at all people. I work at this as my daily discipline; to walk *humbly* with God and *comradely* with people. For all of us are made in the image of God. All of us are bought with the same price of the death of Jesus Christ. All of us who were once ‘no people’ are now ‘the people of God.’ (p. 43)

That’s an image of Christian community, one that squares with the snapshot we see in Philemon.