



On the Tablets of Our Hearts

Jeremiah 17: 9-10

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This morning we dive into a text that I am fairly confident a good many of you have never heard before. I surely had not until I saw the syllabus for courses in the Religion Department at my college one term, and the title of the class was just this: Philemon. Who? Turns out it's a one-pager stuck between Titus and Hebrews. A letter from Paul, no more than 25 verses long; and still, it is Scripture.

Let us listen to what he has to say:

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and coworker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but not much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Now you can be the one at the next trivia night who has the answer to the one in a million question about the seven letters of Paul—when everyone else gets stuck at six: 2 Corinthians, Romans, Galatians, Philippians, First Thessalonians, *not Ephesians*...and, what is it...?

What an odd little letter this is. Why in the world would this have been considered important enough to keep as canon? We assume that there were many letters like this one flying back and forth at the time. There is no deep theological treatise herein, no commendation to the right way of living in community, no instruction to the church, just a letter from Paul to a partner, Philemon, in regard to Onesimus, the slave.

Slavery, as we well know, was a given in the time that Paul wrote. It is a stain on humanity, a sin, as far back as we can find any record, surely a part of the early church; a horror that spread throughout the known world for far too long and still, we are not entirely rid of the sin of treating other humans as commodities. Slavery in Paul's time was not necessarily based on race as much as it was on class, and the estimates were that there were near to 60 million slaves that powered the early Roman economy.

Onesimus, we learn, was one of these. Thought of not as a human being, but as a piece of equipment: a tractor, an excavator, a delivery truck.

We don't exactly know what happened between Onesimus and Philemon. Perhaps we are to understand that Onesimus had run away and is now in Colossae with Paul. The details are a bit fuzzy, but what we have is that Paul wrote to Philemon about the separation, "for a while", and if it were the case that Onesimus did flee, well the consequences for him were dire. Runaways and rebellious slaves were more often than not crucified: Set as a sign to keep the machine going, for the other 59,999,999 had to see that there were swift consequences for such silly ideas of freedom.

As Paul well knew, and as we well know, the Romans were swift to make an example of any of those who had notions of freedom different than their own, or those who in any way challenged the structures of power. The story at the center of Paul's mission is one of just such retributive power; which made the resurrection just that much more powerful a witness in those early days.

Jesus talked about freedom in God, not the Emperor. Jesus came to break the bonds of the oppressed, set the prisoner free. Jesus was crucified. Died. And Buried. But Jesus didn't stay dead. Though they tried, the powers couldn't kill God, and the mission of the early church was salt in the eye of this.

The Apostle Paul, in prison himself while writing this letter and so perhaps prone to contemplating freedom, spent much time talking about the work of reconciliation that Jesus accomplished through that very death and resurrection. And so, at some point Paul sat down and wrote this very personal letter on behalf of Onesimus the slave who had become Paul's "own heart" and beloved brother. A letter seeking reconciliation, but more than that. Way more than that.

When Paul said this to Philemon, "I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become...so you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother."

He knew exactly what he was asking of his partner, Philemon.

“Formerly he was useless to you,” says Paul to Philemon, “but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me”. He is playing with words here: *Onesimus* means useful. Now he is useful to Philemon *and* to Paul.

He is no longer unnoticed. No longer without weight in his corner.

Paul pulls on the thread of this partnership, so as to make it taunt and to see if Philemon will cut cord or will he be moved.

Wait, what? You’re asking me to do *what* exactly? I can imagine Philemon’s head exploding, at first. Why take time to do this? Worry about yourself, Paul. Spend your influence where it matters.

As a rising senior in college, I was just returning from a semester abroad and not quite sure what the next year would bring. I had been studying religion, but mostly as a whim, and assumed that I was headed to graduate school in psychology. That summer, however, I received an odd invitation. Odd to me, anyway, for it didn’t seem right. You see, I was invited by the Rev. John Williams to serve as a Sally Majors Intern through the Chaplain’s Office; a position that many of my peers had sought vigorously over several years of participation in the youth ministry leadership program we were a part of, called the ACTivators (I attended at Austin College, so that AC is capitalized, of course). They had schlepped supplies to weekend retreats and slept on the floor as leaders and shown up to planning meetings.

I had barely been on the campus more than three semesters after transferring there my sophomore year and being away a semester abroad. I had participated in a few ACTivator events but no more than I could count on one hand. No way was I supposed to be an intern. And so it was a pretty big surprise when John called me with this invitation.

Why me, I wondered? We think you’re just right for this, he said. From that point, I can clearly mark the shift towards ministry as a career path.

I might still be around this place, but I’m not entirely sure I would be *here* were it not for that timely invitation and the confidence placed in me that I wasn’t sure I had in myself.

Who has used their influence for you? Who is your John Williams? Your Paul? Who has spoken up for you to get you where you are right now? I’m sure you can name at least one and likely more than that.

Maybe it was one of these that we have here named and remembered throughout the summer; someone who opened a door for you or trod some of the path ahead so that you would know where to go. Someone who had confidence in you when you did not or saw an opportunity and knew you would be just right.

Paul made his stake on the unity of the followers of Christ. He came clean with the profession that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, for all are one in Christ Jesus our Lord. Here in this one little letter, we see that Paul is living out that very ideal in a very personal way to lay his hand on the scale for Onesimus.

It matters what we do as those who profess the kingdom of God and not the kingdom of Rome. It matters that our connectivity binds us not only to ourselves but to the whole body which is Christ’s own.

Paul knew this in his own lived experience, as one who once persecuted the followers of the Way; all until that one day when the light blinded him, and he was converted before God and everyone. In that time, he came before the apostles in Jerusalem and they wanted nothing of him.

They didn't trust him. They didn't believe him. They thought they knew who he was, and they weren't having it. But Barnabas put his hand on the scale then. One among the apostles, Barnabas spoke up for Paul, and using that privilege of trust made the way for Paul to make his own way.

"I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ," says Paul to Philemon. *Think* of all of the lived possibilities of faith. No more slave or free. Foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is life to those who believe.

Love is love is love is love is love is love is love, said Lin Manuel-Miranda in his acceptance speech at the Tony Awards, winning for the hit musical "Hamilton" just days after the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, FL.

In the face of fear, love. In the dark of death, love. In the hopelessness of enmity, love.

Paul appeals to the love he has heard of in regard to Philemon's ministry, and asserts that now is as good a time as any to double down on it.

Paul then put himself on the line, promising to repay the debts Onesimus might have to Philemon, "if he owes you anything, charge that to my account...I say nothing about you owing me even your own self...Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say."

He does not hold back, and indeed this one who has known the power of influence exercises his own privilege to influence now on behalf of Onesimus. This is not a single link chain, but one that continues. Some in the Orthodox tradition hold that Onesimus went on to become the Bishop of Ephesus. Certainly, Paul could not have known this, and even though he did not know still he saw fit to use his considerable gift for rhetorical flare on behalf of this one man.

We never quite know what difference we make, but it's darn worth trying.

You have done this. I've seen it. You have, as individuals and as Swarthmore Presbyterian Church, used your considerable influence and gifts to make a way for others, not necessarily knowing where it may lead. A technology center at Chester Eastside. A mending ministry at Broad Street. Countless lives impacted by small and large decisions to use what you have to open the door for someone else.

As much as our society wants to tell the fable of bootstraps, we know that it is through the doorways opened for us and those we open for others that we tell the full story of grace. We did not come by this grace on our own but were given it. Not earned but received. The doorway of the tomb was open on that third day, and we were all privy to a new story of love and justice. We were all given a new way.

This is all that Paul is doing here, in this one little letter to his partner, Philemon; offering the possibility of a new way for the slave Onesimus. Using his considerable influence after years on the mission field to speak up for this one man, unbeknownst of what shape the future will hold for

him. But assured of that future. And this is canon. This one little letter. Oh, the power of a letter. What more, the power of influence used in love, and for the reconciling of people.

What a privilege it is, what a joy.