

"A Seldom Told Tale"

Philemon 1-25

I'm going to tell you a seldom told tale this morning. The middle of the story is in our Epistle lesson from Paul's letter to Philemon. This letter is considered by many scholars to be the finest specimen of early private Christian correspondence in existence. The letter concerns a runaway slave named Onesimus, who is about to return to Philemon, his former master, who lives in the Greek city of Colossae. Onesimus has committed an unforgivable crime for that day and time; not only has he escaped his master, but in so doing he has also looted his master's goods. Death is the sentence he faces.

But now, Onesimus is not facing this potentially life-ending future alone. The apostle Paul is interceding on his behalf. Onesimus is going back to Philemon, this letter in hand, in the hopes of something better. To understand just what's at stake here, and the enormity of what Paul is asking of Philemon, let's recount Onesimus' story to this point.

Onesimus was a youth, probably not more than fourteen to sixteen years of age. What caused him to run away, we aren't sure. Whether it was fueled by resentment at being a slave and a longing for freedom, or sparked by a particular incident such as a punishment, he runs away from his master Philemon in Colossae, carrying off whatever he can lay his hands on.

He makes his way over long distances, through rough and often dangerous terrain, until finally he arrives in the vast city of Rome. He has managed somehow to keep from being caught, and there he plans to melt into the anonymous crowds, population near a million people at that time, and live off his remaining stolen gains. Soon, however, he begins to repeat the experience of the Prodigal Son; his funds run out, he has no real friends, he needs help.

There is one person in Rome that he does vaguely know; one who is known for helping lost souls in desperate circumstances: his master's old friend, the Apostle Paul. Paul has become something of a local folk-hero in Caesar's Praetorian prison, and it's there that Onesimus finds him, and asks for refuge. Although not a believer as yet, Onesimus had been exposed to the Christian faith while in his master's household, and had seen Paul's message of Christ's love and forgiveness in action. Philemon had been converted by the Apostle, and had opened his house to the congregation in Colossae. His labors for the Gospel had included assistance to the needy, and enough help to the missionaries to be called a partner. When, therefore, the anonymous crowds of Rome no longer satisfy, it's that message that drives Onesimus, in need of such hope, to Paul, even in prison. Paul, for his part, is also in need in the prison. He has just sent Timothy off to the fledgling church at Ephesus that is in need of assistance. Demos, Paul's other helper, has just deserted Paul because of the rigors of the apostolic life. Paul is alone. Each of them, Onesimus and Paul, needs the other at that particular moment. Lives are changed as the young slave comes to faith in Christ, and Paul is ministered to by Onesimus.

Onesimus has confessed his wrongdoing to Paul, and the genuineness of his repentance causes the Apostle to pen this letter to his friend Philemon back in Colossae. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back, without reproach, and to do so, not simply as a returned, thieving servant, but now on the new plane of Christian brotherhood. Make no mistake here, though, Paul is asking no easy thing of Philemon. Under Roman law, a runaway slave, especially one that has stolen property from his master, is considered a dangerous animal; a thing to be beaten and put to death by the most gruesome means as a warning to others.

To help Philemon in his decision, Paul pens this letter. He lays the ground-work for what he is about to ask. He reminds Philemon that the two of them share a common faith, and a common family love in Christ,

which they both have labored side by side to share with the world. That stated, Paul then begins his appeal for Onesimus' life, and he starts with a pun. He says that while Onesimus was once useless, he is now useful. Onesimus' name means useful. Onesimus, Paul is saying in this whimsical way, is now living up to his name, and "surprise! ", it is because he has become a brother Christian. With all this said, Paul now states the real reason for the letter. He wants Philemon to love and forgive Onesimus as he would another brother or sister in Christ; even more, to forgive as Christ has forgiven him, Philemon.

This is an impossible request in that world that sees justice only in terms of retribution. But Paul dares to ask the impossible because he knows a basic change has occurred. Philemon is a follower of Christ. That changes everything. Christ in us, changes how we see other people. It changes how we see justice. It opens us to different possibilities in life because of the changes wrought in us by faith and grace. That's because Christ works a difference in us, makes us different from those who hold only to the old order of just deserts as justice; not ought to make a difference, his presence in us does make a difference. For his justice is one governed by grace; and the force of his justice is not retribution, but redemption. If there is no difference in us, in grace, there is no Christ working in us. Paul, the Christian, cannot treat Onesimus as Paul, once Saul the Persecutor, would have done. Onesimus the Christian now acts just the opposite of Onesimus the thieving servant. Paul is confident that Philemon the Christian will not treat Onesimus as Philemon the wealthy heathen patrician would have done. If there is no positive difference between our homes, our attitudes, our relationships, and our businesses because of the values of Christ we profess, then we need to re-examine our faith. Paul, in that moment, is counting on Philemon; and Christ, in this our moment, is counting on you and me. Can our loving forgiveness really make a difference in someone else's life; even change the world?

Well, here is the rest of the story. About fifty years after that moment, after Paul wrote this letter to Philemon, the great early father of the church, St. Ignatius, was in trouble. He was now also in Rome, in prison, and awaiting execution. The Bishop of Ephesus, an old friend of his, had sent several members of his Ephesian congregations to help Ignatius, to keep his courage and faith up in the face of the torture, and gruesome martyrdom that was coming. Grateful, and needing the Bishop to keep providing such help, Ignatius wrote and sent his own Letter to The Ephesians, thanking them for their faithfulness. That letter still exists. I read it again this week in preparing this sermon, and I consulted commentaries on its internal structure.

Now, here is why I bring that up: it was standard practice among the earliest church fathers and mothers to write their own letters to churches patterning them after the style and language of known letters of the Apostles Paul, or Peter, or John. It showed their direct connection with the Apostles. This letter of Ignatius is no exception to that practice, but for one very intriguing detail. In the first 40 verses, the structure echoes the structure, language and topical development of Paul's letter to Philemon. This is strange, because at that time, few people even knew of this letter of Paul. It had been private correspondence, you see. There was no reason for churches to read it, nor for it to be preserved. On top of that, Ignatius makes direct reference to the Bishop of Ephesus some fourteen times in those few verses, clearly trying to remind the Bishop of something. It's a coded message within a larger message.

Why would Ignatius structure his letter after an unknown Epistle this way? Here's why: Ignatius knew that this Bishop would understand it. The Bishop of Ephesus was perhaps the only person in all Christendom more intimately acquainted with Paul's obscure little letter than even Ignatius himself. You see, the Bishop's name was Onesimus; now around 65 years of age. Philemon had done the something more that

Paul had asked. He had set the slave boy free. Philemon's forgiving acceptance was now living in Onesimus a Bishop of the Church. Through Onesimus, Philemon's forgiveness was touching the world.

Your forgiveness can do the same; and even that something more!
Don't let such grace be a seldom told tale in your life. Instead, let it be the story of your life!