

Good morning! We're going to do something this morning that you may never have done in a worship service before -- we're going to read an entire book of the Bible together..

No, don't run for the doors. I promise this won't take long. Our text this morning is Paul's letter to Philemon, a short, 1 chapter, 25 verse message tucked toward the back of your Bible, just after Titus and right before Hebrews.

1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— **2** also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home:

3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

4 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, **5** because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. **6** I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. **7** Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, **9** yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— **10** that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. **11** Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

12 I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. **13** I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. **14** But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. **15** Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— **16** no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. **18** If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. **19** I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. **20** I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. **21** Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

22 And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer

to your prayers. (From NIV)

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. **24** And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers.

25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

A few nights ago as I was working on this sermon my wife came in the room and asked how things were going. Between wrestling with the text, its application, and the anxiety sermon writing frequently stirs up within me, I had to confess that I was having trouble getting things started. “Well,” she said, “why not start by telling them why it’s included in the Bible?” I smiled, shrugged my shoulders, and replied “Funny thing about that: I’m not sure we really know why.”

Now, don’t get me wrong, the letter to Philemon meets all the base requirements for being a biblical text. It was absolutely written by the apostle Paul, preserved by the church that received it, and made it’s way into the canon of Scripture at the same time as the other New Testament texts. But when we compare it to Paul’s other letters, Philemon seems out of place. It’s not as long or all-encompassing as Romans, not as emotionally charged as Galatians or 1 Corinthians, and looks to have been originally intended only for the eyes and ears of a small church that met in the home of the letter’s recipient, a man named Philemon.

Despite its brevity and overall lack of commands or instructions, Philemon does offer us something extraordinary: a chance to see how the Apostle Paul applied the Gospel to a specific, life-altering situation in the early church. The letter to Philemon tells a story -- or at least alludes to and hints at a story -- of struggle, broken relationships, redemption, love, and reconciliation.

But in order to see all this, we first have to try and reconstruct what exactly had happened between the 3 chief characters in this story -- Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. (O-KNEE-SEE-MUS)

Paul is familiar to us. He’s the writer of this and most of the other letters found in the New Testament. From our text today we find that Paul wrote this particular letter while under arrest, imprisoned, and in chains (vv. 1, 9. & 13). As with so many of the details surrounding this letter we can only guess as to when he wrote it and where he was, and our best guess is that this was written sometime between 53-55 AD from a prison cell in the city Ephesus.

The second person of note that we find in this letter is Philemon, described in v. 2 as Paul’s dear friend and fellow worker. We don’t get to meet Philemon anywhere else in the New Testament, but from everything we read here he seems to have been a great guy. Paul goes so far as to say he thanks God for Philemon frequently in his prayers, and has been encouraged by all the reports he’s heard regarding Philemon’s love for his fellow believers and the church, saying in v. 7: “Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, my brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people.”

The last person we need to know more about is Onesimus, and it’s his story that brings about the occasion for this letter to have been written. Onesimus was a slave who had runaway from none other than Philemon (vv. 10-16,18). His name means “useful” or “profitable”, which was a fairly common name

for a slave (the Romans were not always terribly creative people). We're not told why Onesimus ran nor are we told how he managed to run into Paul. What we are told is that while he was with Paul Onesimus received the Gospel, became a follower of Jesus Christ, and has now been sent back by Paul to face Philemon.

Before we go on, we probably need to stop and address this rather uncomfortable news that not only was Onesimus a slave, but that his owner was a Christian leader known to Paul, and that this was apparently okay at the time of Philemon's conversion. How can it be that a Christian was allowed to own a slave?

Slavery in the Roman Empire was a system largely based on status, economy, and power. There were a number of ways someone could become a slave including being born as one, being captured in war, and selling one's self into service in order to work off a debt. The life of a Roman slave was certainly hard and often times filled with violence and abuse, but some were treated well, worked regular jobs, and could achieve a decent quality of life. It (slavery) was also not necessarily permanent. The Romans had legal ways a slave could pursue their freedom, and many did by the age of 30, though it was nearly impossible for them to shake of the reputation and lowly status of having been a slave in the first place.

Roman slavery was a great deal unlike the slavery of early America. That system was largely based on race, a result of kidnapping and brutal subjugation, and was lifelong.

I do not want to go as far as to say the Roman system was better or somehow more moral than that of early America, but it did leave room for the possibility that Roman citizens who had become believers might retain their slaves and treat them well according to the teachings of Paul in such places as 1 Corinthians 7:21-23. (Note that Paul did not encourage either owning or becoming a slave. As we see from this text, he actually encouraged care and love be brought into what would have been typically careless and loveless relationship between slave and slave owner).

Onesimus has been this sort of slave -- owned by Philemon and apparently unhappy enough to attempt escape by running away. In v. 18 Paul alludes to the fact that Onesimus has wronged Philemon in some way, perhaps having stolen money or goods to finance his escape attempt. While running he meets Paul, becomes a believer, and becomes very dear to Paul -- so much so that Paul writes as if it pains him to return Onesimus to Philemon, saying that in doing so he's sent Philemon "him who is my very heart" (v. 12).

So why would Paul send Onesimus back to be a slave once more? Why not just write to Philemon, explain the situation, and demand that Onesimus be allowed to remain by Paul's to help him during his imprisonment and perhaps beyond?

I think it's because Paul recognized an opportunity for these two brothers in Christ **to do what all believers should do when divided by conflict**: be reconciled to one another based on their common love and new identity Christ.

That reconciliation for these two believers is Paul's goal can hardly be missed. The whole letter hinges on the moment in vv. 16-17 where Paul asks Philemon to accept and welcome Onesimus not as a returned slave ready to receive punishment for his crimes, but as a redeemed and repentant follower of Jesus. Paul is clear that Onesimus is returning (v. 16),

no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

Don't miss what Paul's doing here, what he's claiming about his dear son in the faith, Onesimus. When Onesimus ran away he was a slave, a fugitive, a lawbreaker. But something radical and wonderful has happened. Onesimus has been transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and returns not as a slave, but as so much more than a slave -- as a brother in Christ worthy of respect and love.

Philemon was known as a good man, a great church leader, and a refresher of all God's people (a gift mentioned twice in both v. 7 and 20). Paul is asking that Onesimus be added to the community Philemon's built and counted among those he seeks to bless. But that can only happen if Philemon is willing to embrace Paul's command in v. 17,

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

This can only happen if Philemon is willing to follow Paul's lead and engage the process of reconciliation. He wants the fellowship in Christ these two men now share to create a space to forgive, repent, heal, and bring together that which the world says should remain bitterly apart and opposed.

He'd want the same thing for us today: for our relationships and our church to be a space for the ministry of reconciliation to take place based on our mutual love for and redemption in Jesus Christ.

The simple question the book of Philemon presents us with is this: **How do we go about the process of reconciliation?** How do we, like the three men in this story, humble ourselves and commit to repairing relationships? The text doesn't offer any prescriptive ways of going about reconciliation, but I think if we take some time to reflect on the actions and stories of Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus we can learn quite a bit about welcoming and accepting one another according to who we are in Christ.

First, let's take a look at Paul. He's clearly the peacemaker and mediator in this situation. His method for mediation is really quite something, and we want to be sure not to miss it. It would have been so easy for Paul to simply command Philemon to forgive and accept Onesimus. As an apostle, a great evangelist, and even the one who helped bring Philemon to faith in Christ, he had all the authority and power he needed to give such an order.

But that's not what he does. In fact, in vv. 8-9, Paul specifically says he's setting aside this authority and appealing to Philemon **on the basis of love, not power.** He then introduces Onesimus as a redeemed and cherished brother in Christ, and then does something amazing: he says if Onesimus wronged Philemon in any way, Paul himself will assume the cost. Look again at vv. 17-19:

17 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. **18** If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. **19** I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self

Paul's entire appeal is based on the the pattern he's learned not from the world, but from the Gospel. Paul had spent a lot of his life using his power and authority to demand obedience from people he thought of as criminal and inferior. That led to a whole lot of anger, violence, and bloodshed. Here, **Paul models the Gospel and pursues reconciliation among his brothers the same way Christ pursued it for you and me: by making sacrifices, sharing burdens, and loving broken people in a radical, undeserved, grace-filled way.**

In this situation Paul directly applies what he'd declared in 2 Corinthians 5:16-18 (ESV)

[16] From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. [17] Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. [18] All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; (2 Corinthians 5:16-18, ESV)

So, how do you go about helping your brothers and sisters in Christ pursue reconciliation? By applying the Gospel directly to the matter at hand. Don't make demands based on your authority and don't see the problem from the world's point of view. Look on your fellow believers as Christ did, with love, and encourage them to forgive as the Lord has forgiven. **That's the role of a peacemaker and mediator in reconciliation: draw people toward Christlikeness.** Challenge them to have gospel-shaped relationships. It's hard work and takes a ton of humility and patience, but it's worth the cost.

What if you find yourself not in the position of Paul, but within the conflict and broken relationship itself, like Philemon and Onesimus? What are you to do then? Does this short letter offer you any guidance as you pursue reconciliation with someone you've wronged, or someone who has wronged you?

This morning I'd like to suggest two pragmatic lessons about reconciliation we can draw out from the story of Philemon and Onesimus.

First, when pursuing reconciliation, everyone involved has to be willing to come together and work things out. Paul didn't allow Onesimus to hide out with him and avoid Philemon forever. He did the hard thing and told his dearly beloved brother to return home and make things right with Philemon. I would imagine this idea wasn't very appealing to Onesimus the first time Paul brought it up. According to Roman law, Philemon had every right to execute Onesimus upon his return. Yet, over time and with patience Paul convinced Onesimus that going back and facing Philemon was the right thing to do, no matter the cost.

Can you imagine the hard conversations Philemon and Onesimus probably had to have? Onesimus explaining why he ran and asking forgiveness for whatever he'd done to wrong Philemon. Philemon having to face the facts that perhaps he hadn't treated Onesimus well in the past -- after all, the slave had run away for a reason. Apologies and forgiveness would have been necessary on both sides of the conflict. **Reconciliation between flawed, sinful human beings is rarely a one-way street.** It's so easy to do hurtful things, say hurtful words, and drive seemingly eternal, immovable wedges between one another. The rather blunt message we find in Philemon is this: do the hard work of reconciliation. Don't shy away from it. Go and face the person or people involved, and together everyone must move toward the Gospel. We're not smart enough or kind enough to heal these relationships on our own. We must

pursue reconciliation on the basis of love and before our Savior who has taught us how to heal and be healed.

Is there someone in your life with whom you need to pursue reconciliation? If so, then know that things likely won't be able to heal unless you face one another and create the opportunity for confession, repentance, forgiveness, and healing. Some offenses are far more painful than others, and there are certainly times when we've been hurt by someone and it's not safe to face them again. God understand this, and he'll seek to heal you both in different ways. But if you can come before the person you've wronged or the person who has wronged you, especially if they are a fellow believer, do so with the hope and goal of working toward the reconciliation Christ wishes for you both to experience.

Second, when pursuing reconciliation, must be willing to abandon all systems and perceptions of superiority. The radical thing Paul asked of Philemon and Onesimus was to let go of what the world told them they ought to believe about themselves and instead cling to the truth that in Christ they have been made brothers, co-heirs to the Kingdom of God, and equals no matter what their station in life continued to be. Philemon was no better than Onesimus, and Onesimus was no lesser than Philemon. In Christ there is no social stratification, no hierarchy of power where some are made to be less than others. Paul's words from Galatians 3:26-28 are easily applied here:

26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, **27** for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. **28** There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Does this mean Onesimus was set free? Honestly, we don't know. Becoming a freed slave in Roman society was not always a great thing as it often left the slave without a home, resources, or income. But what we do know is that the very nature of the Gospel undermines all systems of stratification and superiority. In Christian homes around the Roman Empire something unthinkable was happening: slaves were being loved, cared for, and invited into the home of their Christian masters. They were occasionally set free and then supported by their former owners. They were being regarded no longer as slaves, so much more than slaves, indeed they were being accepted as brothers and sisters in Christ. They had a seat at the family table. They were loved for who they truly were, children of God.

A key part of reconciliation is abandoning the systems and perceptions of superiority the world encourages us to maintain. It's hard to make peace and repair a relationship with someone who, in your heart, you don't truly believe is worthy of your love. In fact, if you can't truly love someone for who they are in Christ and you cannot truly reconcile with them, you'll likely have a hard time reconciling yourself with God. This can happen in so many small and subtle ways that we don't even realize we're doing it. We look down upon with less education, opportunity, money, or social status. We buy into the lies of racism and racial supremacy, and thus become unable to join hands with our fellow believers who are just as loved by God. We become hurt by the systems of superiority and oppression and harbor bitterness, resentment, and hatred for those who look down on us and keep us trapped in injustice.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is incompatible with this sort of belief and behavior. The love of Christ demands that we look on others with compassion, with understanding, and with grace. We cannot reconcile with others if we believe ourselves better, worse, or opposed to them. We've got to see ourselves and another as Jesus sees...beloved creations, redeemed by grace, saved by faith, and children of God Almighty.

If you struggle with loving others this way, I invite you this morning to confess that to God and repent. If you struggle with pride, with superiority, with believing yourself to be better than others based on something you've achieved or some difference in backgrounds, I beg you to confess and repent. Begin the work of reconciliation this morning, right now, and commit yourself to welcoming all people as Christ has welcomed you: loved, forgiven, and worthy of grace.