

## “Choices and Consequences”

*Jeremiah 18:1-11; Philemon 1:1-21*

September 8, 2019

I am quite sure I have never preached about Philemon. I know the story, but digging into it for a relevant interpretation was a good learning experience for me. Here is some history:

Onesimus probably was a slave, but doubtfully one who had run away. House arrest was common in Rome. If Paul had been behind bars, it would have been difficult to build a relationship with Onesimus, which the text clearly indicates has happened. Philemon had likely even sent Onesimus to support Paul, given Philemon's history with Paul. That beautiful text from Matthew 25:36 reminds us how Jesus feels about extending ministry to those who are in prison. During this assignment, it seems that a moment of transformation transpired between Paul and Onesimus, a transformation in relationship that Paul describes by saying that Onesimus has become a child of his heart. Paul then calls for Philemon to refresh *his* heart (v. 20). What else could this mean than for Philemon to welcome Onesimus into his household as if Onesimus were Paul himself?

Another important point is that Paul expects this letter to be heard by the whole community even as he turns to Philemon directly in his request. Paul is calling upon the witness of the whole church in Philemon's house to ensure that Paul's hopes are fulfilled. Sometimes, when facing difficult circumstances, it is helpful to have friends who can hold us accountable to follow through with the intentions we desire. Whether Philemon desired to incorporate Onesimus into his family as a brother, we don't really know. We do know, based on what Paul understood from the Reconciling love of Jesus, that Philemon was expected to issue love and forgiveness to his former slave.

Eric Barreto, Professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary, offered this conclusion: “In the end, I'm convinced that Paul here is calling for a radical reorientation of the community's understanding of Onesimus' identity. He is no longer merely a cog in the machine of the household, no longer worthy because of the utility he provides for his master. Onesimus is now a beloved brother. He is kin. And this transformation is a vivid embodiment of the gospel. He is a walking, talking, breathing reminder of the power of the good news.

For Paul, what happens in these Christian communities is a matter of life and death. His letters are not just doctrinal. He's not just concerned with ideas, with the right Christological or theological perspective. Paul is a pastor. He cares for these communities because these communities are seeds of the resurrection, sites where the resurrected life can already flourish, places of resistance to an empire that would place us in rank according to social, cultural, even religious status.

Paul is also placing a great deal of *trust* in Onesimus to deliver this letter to Philemon. For Onesimus to travel from Rome, in the center of Italy, all the way up the peninsula, across the shores of the Caspian Sea and down into Asia Minor to the house church in Colosseae, he has had plenty of time to see what Paul wrote in this letter. But the relationship that had developed between these two, provided confidence in Onesimus' faith in Paul, because he had learned the trust Paul had in the Lord Jesus to bring us all into the circle of equality and hospitality.

The reason I invited representatives of Teachers, Students, the Session, the Board of Deacons, the Choir, and others... to stand in the front of the church for our Litany of Re-dedication to the ministry of this church was to help us celebrate the many gifts, skills, and abilities that are available and used by everyone here. When the Session makes a decision, we trust one another to carry out the task, with confidentiality and/or transparency, depending on what is needed. When Charles and the choir rehearse the music, we trust they will lift our spirits with inspirational worship. When the Deacons minister to the Homebound, we know the Body of Christ is nourished by their love and care. When the teachers take on the responsibility of interpreting the Word of God,

we can rely on an openness to engage with that conversation. When New Members take the leap of faith to connect with this congregation, they trust they will be welcomed and supported. This church needs everyone around the table, to lead, to teach, to prepare food, to wash dishes, and to provide transportation for our beloved family who might need a ride.

We stand on the threshold of change, but that is nothing new. Paul was asking Philemon to broaden his understanding of the full and trusting relationship we have with Jesus, and with each other. May we live into that trust, continued learning, and lasting relationship. Amen.