

16th Sunday after Pentecost, (Proper 18)

Text: Philemon 1-21 (NIV)

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, ²to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. ⁷Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. ⁸Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—¹⁰I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³I 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. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. ¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—¹⁶no 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 man and as a brother in the Lord. ¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. ²²And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. ²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. ²⁴And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Theme: What Would You Have Done?

One July 4, 1776 the American Colonies issued the Declaration of Independence, which was authored by Thomas Jefferson. It begins, **“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”** There is a lot of irony to that important phrase that all men are created equal because even Thomas Jefferson owned slaves. Slavery was an issue which our nation struggled with until President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation 150 years ago this year on January 1, 1863 to free all of the remaining slaves in the South.

Slavery is an issue that the world has struggled with for centuries. In the first century Roman empire, there were millions of slaves. There were probably as many slaves in places like Rome as there were free people. At that time slavery was not racial. Sometimes they were captives from a war. Other people were born as slaves. There was also no such thing as bankruptcy. If you could not pay your debts, you, your wife, and your children would be sold into slavery to pay those debts. Slaves performed a number of functions at that time. They could work in the fields or mines or as household servants, but many of them also served as doctors and in other professions. They were often better educated than their masters. Slaves were considered a piece of property and had no rights at all.

Sometimes they were treated well, but they could also be punished in any way that the master desired, including death. The consequence for running away was usually death, probably by crucifixion. The large number of slaves at that time also made it very difficult for free people to find work because many of the jobs were taken by slaves who were cheaper.

The letter to Philemon deals with a slave named Onesimus who ran away from his master, named Philemon. Onesimus made his way to Rome where he came into contact with Paul. This morning I would like to ask what you would have done if you were Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon. Each of these men took big risks because faith in Jesus changed their relationships drastically.

I. What would you have done?

If you were Paul? Paul had been in prison and under house arrest for several years. When he returned to Jerusalem after his 3rd missionary journey, the Jews rioted and wanted him killed. He was held in various prisons until he appealed to Caesar. He was taken to Rome, where he was under house arrest until his hearing before Ceasar, a right that Paul had because he was a Roman citizen. Paul was given a lot of freedom during these 2 years of house arrest. People were allowed to freely come and go, and he was allowed to preach the Gospel. Then one day an escaped slave named Onesimus showed up at his door. Escaped slaves often found their way to Rome where they hoped to make a better life for themselves. Paul had been to Philemon's home in the past where the church in Colosse met. Onesimus probably remembered Paul from some of those visits. It seems as though things turned out badly for Onesimus in Rome, and he turned to Paul for help. In the process he became a Christian. He also became very useful to Paul in his work in Rome. The name Onesimus means "useful." He was probably born as a slave and given this name as a marketing tool. Now he had truly become a useful member of our Lord's Church.

What should Paul do? Should he keep quiet about Onesimus to his friend Philemon? Should he risk Onesimus' life by sending him back to his master? What would you have done? Would you have kept Onesimus with you or sent him back? Paul decided to send him back. He sends him with this letter. He appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother in Christ. He appeals for him to forgive, and even offers to repay anything that Onesimus might have stolen. He took a chance that Philemon would be obedient to his appeal in Christ.

What would you have done if you were Onesimus? Onesimus probably didn't just run away. It appears as though he filled his pockets with Philemon's money and ran away. He also knew what the penalty for a runaway slave was. Most of them were crucified. They were made an example to others that they would not steal their master's possession and run. What would you have done if Paul put this letter in your hand and sent you back? If would have been tempting to go someplace else, any where else. He was putting his own life at risk by returning to Colosse. You can imagine how he must have been shaking when he returned to his master with this letter in hand.

What would you have done if you were Philemon? He probably paid good money for Onesimus. From what we know of his character, he probably treated Onesimus well. But Onesimus didn't live up to the meaning of his name. He became useless by stealing Philemon's money and running away. Then suddenly he saw this run-away slave at his door, begging for forgiveness in Christ. Onesimus gave him Paul's letter, which appealed to him to forgive and receive Onesimus back, no longer as

a slave but as a beloved brother in Christ. Paul did make it hard to say no, by reminding Philemon that he owed Paul even more for sharing the Gospel with him, and Paul promises (or threatens) to be his houseguest the next time that he is in town. After the appeal that Paul makes in this letter, how could Philemon look Paul in the eye and tell him that he had Onesimus crucified? What would you have done? Would you have punished Onesimus or would you have received him in a new relationship, as a beloved brother in Christ? The existence of this letter shows that Philemon did receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ.

II. This letter is a good illustration of what Jesus has done for us.

Luther wrote, "We are Christ's Onesimi." We have taken God's blessings and ran. We have been useless to Him and deserted Him many times in our lives. Christ paid the penalty of our sins as Paul offered to pay for any wrong which Onesimus did to Philemon. He intercedes before His Father for our forgiveness. Without Christ we encounter an angry God, who will punish us for our sins. But because of Christ's intercession for us, God is forgiving. He even calls us His beloved children in Christ.

III. That is why we can also take such risks with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Generally, sending an escaped slave back to their master was a death sentence. Generally, an escaped slave would not willingly return back to their master. Generally, such a master would make an example of that slave by having him crucified. But through faith in Christ, the master-slave was no longer the primary relationship between these people. They were now beloved brothers in Christ. Instead of hiding something from each other. It was all brought out in the open and dealt with as brothers in Christ. Now Paul could look forward to that trip to Colosse when they would all meet again. That is a great example for all of us. We have various earthly relationships with other Christians, but there is one relationship which trumps them all, that is to be a beloved brother or sister in Christ. This brings a new relationship, which Paul would also write about in his letter to the Colossians, "*Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*" (Col 3:11-13) As Christians, it is our aim to love and forgive as God, our Father, have loved and forgiven us in Christ.

What would you have done? Because of changes in our society, we are never confronted with the exact situation which these men faced. But there are times when like Paul, we need to put our trust in a Christian friend, like Onesimus we need to face the music and plead for forgiveness, and like Philemon we need to be willing to forgive. The only way that we can take such risks in other people is to remember the sins which our Lord has forgiven us and to see them as brothers and sisters, whom we love in Christ. Thank God for that new relationship that He gives to us in Christ that tears down the walls of hostility and builds a relationship of love in our Savior. Amen

***Pastor Don Hougard Benediction Lutheran Church
Milwaukee, WI Sept 8, 2013***