

Sermon Series: *Four of the Strangest Books in the Bible*

Sermon III: "Philemon"

Texts: Isaiah 42:1-7; Philemon 17-18

The Reverend Joanna M. Adams

Morningside Presbyterian Church

July 12, 2009

The last week in June, Pope Benedict XVI weighed in with his opinion about a box full of bone fragments. The Pope was quoted as saying that scientific tests on these bone fragments, which some believe to be the remains of the Apostle Paul, "seemed to conclude" that the bones really are Paul's bones. The Pope made the announcement at the Basilica of St. Paul, which is built over a white-marbled sarcophagus containing bone fragments, which have traditionally been believed to have been Paul's bones for a couple of thousand years. According to carbon dating, they certainly date from either the first or second century. (*The New York Times*, 6/29/09) From my Protestant perspective, I'm dubious as to how one determines whose bones are in which box. I've never been one to put much credence in claims about people who find or claim to find pieces of the hull of Noah's Ark or splinters from the cross of Jesus. You remember all the fuss a few years ago about the Shroud of Turin, which was alleged by some to be the burial cloth from the tomb in which Jesus had been laid. There are differing claims as to where Jesus was laid. Actually, no one knows for sure which tomb was Jesus' tomb, and even if the right one were identified and a shroud had been found within it, who could say that it was the shroud of the crucified carpenter from Galilee? And even if we could say it was the shroud of the crucified carpenter from Galilee, we would still be lacking any evidence whatsoever that Jesus rose from the dead. That kind of knowledge, one knows by faith alone.

Today, we have a replica of a genuinely, indisputably authentic artifact from the time of the Apostle Paul: a letter written by Paul when he was in his mid-50s. Remember, Paul had never himself met the earthly Jesus, but his life had been utterly transformed by his encounter with the risen Christ. That's the kind of proof that counts with me, when it comes to the resurrection - transformed lives. Paul became Christ's greatest ambassador, his most energetic missionary, his most articulate interpreter. He is the author, Paul is, of most of the letters in the New Testament, and there are several others attributed to him that he actually did not write. He had high credibility, shall we say. Today's document has the highest credibility. It is as authentic a piece of Paul's actual writing as one can find. He explicitly says in this letter to Philemon, "I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand." In those days, letters were often written by younger associates or secretaries, but Paul penned this personal note to Philemon, with the understanding, not only that it would be a letter from Paul to Philemon, but that Philemon would share with others the contents of the letter - others in this household of faith in Colossae, where Paul and Philemon and a few others had

started a faith community. The letter in its original form consists of only 335 words. It is the shortest book in the canon. One chapter long, it is composed of 24 verses, but its brevity belies the breadth and depth of the controversies that have swirled around it for the past 2000 years.

If you just landed on Earth from Pluto or Mars, you might want to know that Chris and I are in the midst of the sermon series on *Four of the Strangest Books in the Bible*. You can tell me later whether you think Philemon actually qualified.

Let me briefly outline the letter before we analyzed the dustups surrounding it. Paul writes to Philemon while Paul is in prison, where he spent a lot of time. His missionary work was considered a threat to the Roman Empire, which was everywhere at the time. Paul identifies Timothy, one of his young aides-de-camp, as co-writer, but Timothy plays no observable role in determining the letter's content.

Clearly, Paul likes Philemon. He addresses him affectionately. Obviously, they have shared faith, friendship, and church leadership in a very positive way. After the formalities are behind him, Paul turns to the trouble at hand. The issue is the estrangement that exists between Philemon and the person who is to deliver Paul's letter to Philemon. That person's name is Onesimus. Paul wants to set things straight between the two men, not just for their own sakes but also because of the negative affect the animosity between the two will have on the ministry of the church. If the situation between them continues to be marked by estrangement and animosity, then the church itself will be in trouble. If the situation isn't set right - that is if justice is not done, there will be no peace, and without peace, there will be no ministry. (NRSV Notes) There is nothing more authentically Paul than this assertion in his letter - *Until justice is served, God cannot be served*.

So, what caused the rift? What is the remedy? Here is where the controversy comes in. Beginning in the fourth century, which is pretty early, with Greek exegete John Chrysostom, the basic interpretation has been that Onesimus was a runaway slave who had belonged to Philemon. Paul, then, is sending back the runaway slave to his master, and along with him, he sends a letter saying, "If Onesimus owes you any money for his time away or as retribution for his disobedience, then I will make it right; I will pay what is owed to you." What is important in this situation is not forgiveness but justice. Accounts must be set right. Roman law held a slave liable to his master for the value of each day's work lost. Paul was willing to pay all that money, even though he was in prison and not a wealthy man, so that the work of the church could move forward unencumbered by resentment over inequity.

This whole letter makes me want to squirm. The first time I read it, I couldn't believe that it was really in the Bible. I kept looking for Paul to say a word, at least one word, condemning the institution of slavery, but there is not a word

condemning the institution of slavery. I was further shaken when I realized that there is nothing in the entire New Testament that condemns slavery. Paul wrote eloquently about freedom in his letter to the Galatians: *For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.* Yet, Paul was also an apostle of peace. To the Romans, he wrote, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. If possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably among all." Perhaps Paul leaned toward pacifism and was hindered in his moral outlook, because slavery, which was basic to the functioning of Roman society, could only have been overthrown by violent means. (Ralph Martin, *Interpretation Series*, 1991) You can come up with all sorts of reasons and rationale, but I think Paul did not speak against slavery because he accepted slavery as a part of life. In that way, his viewpoint did not reflect the will or mind of God.

To be sure, when he reflected on the coming kingdom of God manifested in the here and now, he was quite egalitarian in his outlook. He said, *As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew nor Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male or female, for you are all one in Christ.* That's kingdom talk; he was a man of his time as well as a spokesman for the kingdom. There was no equality of the sexes. In his day, Jews who were circumcised believed themselves to be superior to Gentiles who were uncircumcised. Paul did not condemn slavery. Men owned other men and women and children, and they were treated like pieces of property. But you can give Paul this - at least he had begun to see that *there is no longer Jew nor Greek, slave nor free*, that Christ's coming was bringing about a radical reordering of the status and worth of all people.

But it is a tragic letter to me. The tragedy is in what is missing from its content, and even more tragically, in how it has been used time and again as a Biblical justification for – guess what ? – slavery. Though a strong current of compassion runs through every one of these 335 words, in 19th century America, the words were reshaped by many in the south into a canonical sanction for the institution of slavery. Plantation owners cited Philemon in support of the Fugitive Slave Law, which required runaway slaves, even if they'd run to free states, to be returned to their owners, as Paul had returned Onesimus to Philemon. Once again, we have evidence that a literal, every-word-is-gospel-truth reading of the Bible can be used to justify almost anything, including almost anything evil.

One of the reasons I rejoice in the Protestant tradition that has formed my mind and soul is that our understanding of the way God works in the church is that "the church is reformed and is to be reformed, according to the word of God and the call of the Spirit." And so it is that we can read the same scripture we have understood one way for a long time and be given new and different insights. Once the Bible was used as a justification for slavery, as a justification for the exclusion of women in leadership roles in the church, as a justification for polygamy - we could go on and on and on, but God is always reforming the mind and practices of the church.

Friday was John Calvin's 500th birthday. He was the great Christian reformer and a realist who knew that the moral vision of any faith community could become skewed, and that the only way it could be fixed again is through a mighty act of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit. "We would be nothing," Calvin wrote, "without the free intervention of grace." (As quoted by Marilynne Robinson in *The Death of Adam*) But there is such intervention, and we limited creatures do receive new insights and come to realize that what we once thought was A-OK is really terribly wrong.

Perhaps the most important question Philemon raises for us today is this one: What is it that seems so perfectly acceptable now, that might later prove to be glaringly outside the will of God? Which categorical prejudice or exclusion? What about inequalities built into our health care system?

How about disregard for the planet entrusted to our care? Will people look back a hundred years from now and say, "They had a chance then, but they didn't take it. They read Genesis 1 and said to themselves, 'According to the Bible, the earth is ours to exploit however we choose,' rather than, 'The human creature is appointed by God to be the loving steward of the earth.'"

A few read Philemon and conclude that Onesimus was not Philemon's slave, but rather his brother. Read the whole thing, and decide yourself. Either way, one final point I want to make has nothing to do with slave or brother, but with character and conscience. Character and conscience are two words that seem to be missing from the modern vocabulary, whether it be in the public discussion about the South Carolina governor's recent trysts in Argentina, or Bernie Madoff's Ponzi schemes or misconduct and greed on the part of some bankers and stockbrokers that produced the financial meltdown that keeps on ruining peoples lives. There is everywhere plenty of evidence that our society is suffering a moral decline of massive magnitude. (Robinson) Paul appealed to Philemon's conscience: *I could force you to do the right thing with Onesimus, but I'm sure that you, because of your good conscience, will want to do the right thing. You are capable of goodness.* On that basis, Paul made his plea. He expected Philemon to rise to his better self, and obviously he did. Why do I say 'obviously'? We have the letter. If Philemon had rejected what Paul had written, don't you think he'd put it in the fireplace and put a match to it?

One last thing: Debts must be paid. It is not enough to say you're sorry. What has been taken needs to be returned. Justice must be satisfied; honor restored. There is a moral direction to human history. This is the trajectory on which God set the world from the beginning. At a time when young people look in vain for role models, when the ethical mantra by which so many live today is that "the end justifies the means," I'm glad to read a 2000-year-old letter and to be reminded that character matters. God gave us a conscience, and God gave us freedom to use that conscience, and it is our responsibility to use it and to do the right thing

so that justice will be served and peace made possible. When there is peace, there is room for the freely given grace of God to go to work in this world, in your life and mine. I don't know whether things are out of balance in your family, but if you need to set the scales right, if there are debts that need to be paid, pay them. Say you're sorry. Make amends, and then get on with living a good and honorable life.

A friend of mine reminded me recently of the conversation between Scarlett O'Hara and Ashley Wilkes in the movie version of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. "Ashley," Scarlett asks, "what's to stop us from just leaving everything and going to New Orleans?"

"Honor," he answered. "Only honor."

Character - it can be developed through experience, and through the grace of God. You and I can be empowered to do the right thing and to embody in our lives the kind of character young people and children will want to emulate. This is perhaps **the** moral mandate of our time.

Benediction:

Always do the right thing. It will gratify your friends and astonish the rest. -Mark Twain