

I can only speak for myself but I expect you'll agree with this statement: there is a very short list of people to whom I could write the line, "I expect I'll be sprung from jail any day now. Prepare the guest room, I'm going to need a place to stay."

I like this version of Paul. Sometimes I find Paul a little hard to take... he can be curmudgeonly, sarcastic, politically incorrect – even when we update his words for modern times, he still sounds a little harsh now and then. But here in this moment in his letter to Philemon, he sounds a little bit hopeful, a little less strident.

He must have been pretty good friends with Philemon. I tend to think that if one feels a certain comfort in inviting oneself over out of getting out of the big house it tends to indicate a certain level of closeness.

I think I'd like this Paul personally.

You know, I don't always like Paul – perhaps some of you feel the same way – sometimes he misses the mark a little bit, to my mind. It's okay if you don't feel that way, but sometimes I wonder if he could reread his correspondence if there wouldn't be a few things he might write differently.

I have sent e-mails I wanted to recall the moment I hit the send button.

There are a few notes I've sent where I've thought to myself, "If someone read that out of context, I look like a real jerk."

And Paul wrote about things that matter to folks, too, things like money, and sex, and friendship – and he was honest.

We don't always like it when people are truly honest with us, do we?

You have to have a certain level of friendship, a certain level of trust to get to genuine honesty, don't you?

I mean this: I will tell you if you have a hunk of spinach caught in your teeth, egg on your face... remnants of this morning's poppy seed muffin on your gum line; I'll tell you that. That's the sort of guy I am and I hope you'd tell me.

But, I was once sitting in my office working on something when a woman in my congregation walked in with the zipper on her pants down. I couldn't bring myself to say a word. So when she was leaving to go next door to my assistant's office, I dashed out a note on a slip of paper and folded it up and said, "Would you please take this to Cheryl, it would save me a lot of work." The note to my assistant read, "Tell her that her fly is down."

Sometimes it's hard to say things.

Peter Hobbie, a good friend to this congregation and to your clergy once noted, "Most people value the friendship more than they value the friend."

It's hard to tell the truth sometimes.

I can tell you about spinach in your teeth, but if you want marital advice you're going to have to ask for it.

You have to be pretty good friends to say, "I'm sending your slave back to you and you have to do right by him."

Those slave passages in the Bible are hard ones, aren't they?

Sometimes you have to look *through* the text to find the Gospel.

I know that is the case with the slave passages of the Bible and with the sexuality passages and the gender passages – we have to look *through* the story and see the Gospel.

And the Gospel is there to be seen.

Paul does send Onesimus back to Philemon, but with a letter.

And that letter is a piece of work. Paul said to Philemon, “Now, I want you to treat Onesimus as a brother. I could command you to do this, but I’d rather you’d do it because you see that everything has changed.”

Paul laid it on thick. “Now, I’m not going to tell you what you have to do because you haven’t asked me, but here’s what I’d do... oh, and if Onesimus has wronged you in any way, just charge it to my account. He was good to me while I was in jail. Just charge it to me and we won’t ever speak of you owing me your life. Just charge it to my account.”

Paul and Philemon must have been good friends.

Perhaps they were good enough friends that Philemon knew what Paul was preaching Galatia. Paul was preaching a message that everything had changed. “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no more slave nor free, there is no longer male and female.”¹

Every thing has changed.

As a runaway slave returned to his master Onesimus had earned a harsh sentence. He was subject to beatings and imprisonment and even death. You know how tyranny works; you have to keep the oppressed down. If you don’t make an example out of mischief-makers, others will get ideas. In Paul’s day, Philemon owed it to the order of society that Onesimus must be punished.

But Paul said to him instead, “Philemon, you are a Christian now. Everything has changed.”

“In Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male and female.”

¹ Galatians 3:28

Everything has changed.

We talk about change every week.

We pray, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.”

That is the sort of change that Paul is talking about, the change that leads us to forgive as we have been forgiven.

That’s what God’s grace is; it is when everything changes.

I don’t mean to meddle, but in your life, is there anything that needs changing?

If grace ever seems empty to us, it is usually because we’ve succumbed to the belief that nothing can ever change.

It happens all sorts of different ways, that we come to believe that nothing can change – it sometimes is a lesson learned over time, over and over again, an oft-repeated lie that begins to warp reality.

Perhaps we come to believe that we don’t deserve God’s grace – that we don’t deserve to be loved the way we want to: man after man has treated me wrong, so I may as well get used to it.

Perhaps we come to believe that behavior is destiny: I couldn’t stop drinking before so I can’t stop now.

Perhaps we come to believe that economics drive reality: I’m trapped in debt so deep that I’ll never get out, so let’s spend some more.

Perhaps we come to believe that social structures will never change: I was born a slave and a slave I will die.

And then comes the Gospel: everything can change.

I know many of you have faced moments in your lives when everything changed.

I have in my own.

The truth of the Gospel is that when everything changes *that* is when God's grace begins blowing through us.

The more I minister the more I come to believe that the Gospel does not exist to preserve very much. There are some things that need preservation to be sure. But as often as not, the question needs to be asked, "Did Jesus die to keep that in place?"

That's a salient question because the grace of God is always a costly grace. God doesn't deal in cheap grace.

So the question is, "Did Jesus die so that Onesimus could remain a slave?" Paul thought not, so he wrote to Philemon.

Or perhaps the question is, "Did Jesus die to preserve a status quo where some gain wealth upon wealth and others struggle to have enough food for communion?"

Paul thought not, or so he wrote to the Corinthians.

Or perhaps the question is, "Did Jesus die so that Jews and Gentiles would go on segregating themselves from each other?" Paul thought not, so he wrote to the Galatians.

The heart of the gospel is the promise that everything can change through God's grace.

Fred Craddock tells a wonderful story. It's been a long time since I've heard it so I might get the particulars wrong, but it goes like this. After staying over a Saturday night in an unfamiliar city so he could save money on the airfare, Craddock got up on Sunday morning and prepared to go to church. Inquiring at the desk of the hotel where he was staying, he learned there was a small church nearby. It was the sort of place, he said, where it was clear that the members had built it themselves and loved it. So he sidled into a pew and waited for church to start.

As the time for the sermon came, Craddock noted that the preacher was, at best, ungainly to look at. He was physically very large and his head was misshapen with patchy hair. His eyes were filmy and he had to hold the Bible very close to his face to read it. As he spoke, the sinews on his neck stood out and it was clear that he had learned to speak as an adult.

But he said he soon lost all consciousness of the man's appearance as he began to preach on the text of 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul said, "the greatest of these is love."

The sermon, he said, was C grade at best – neither poetic nor prophetic – but rather, full of love. The preacher extended love as he preached and the congregation gave it right back.

How is it, he wondered, in God's providence that this creature that is so unattractive on the outside has come to have this quality on the inside?

He lingered after the sermon and overheard a woman say, "I wish I could have known your mother." Craddock figured she must have found this as mystifying as he did.

And the preacher replied, "My mother's name is Grace."

"That was an interesting reply you have the woman," Craddock said.

And the preacher replied, "Is it? When I was born, I was put up for adoption with the county, and as you can see, nobody would want to adopt me, so I went from foster home to foster home. And I must have been about sixteen or seventeen when I saw some young people going into a church. I wanted to be with the young people so I went in, and there I met grace – the grace of God."

You know, this table here is where we go to meet the grace of God. And when God's grace blows through us, everything changes.

Remember what Peter said about valuing the friend even more than the friendship?

Friends know when it is time to show up – which is why I think the most important verse of Philemon, after everything Paul has said about the Gospel and about Onesimus, is that one last line, “One more thing... prepare the guest room, I’m hoping to be there soon.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.