



8 March 2018

A NEW RELATIONSHIP

Philemon 1:8 *“For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9 yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. 10 I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13 I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15 Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. 20 Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.”*

So what does one say about this letter? St Paul is in prison, where he meets Onesimus, a runaway slave. Paul becomes his spiritual father (vs 10), and instructs him to return to his owner, Philemon. Paul then suggests that the chance prison meeting of the slave is so that Philemon “*might have him back forever*”. This is outrageous! To tell someone to voluntarily return to slavery is bad enough, but to write to the slave owner without condemning slavery is just plain wrong.

But we read this with the benefit of hindsight. Today it is unthinkable for Christ-followers to own slaves. But at the time of St Paul slavery was embedded in the economy and social construct of the world. So while Paul cannot end the system of slavery – he does the unthinkable: he asks the slave owner to treat his slave as a family member. Paul urges Philemon to see Onesimus as “*no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother* “. Here we see that following the way of Jesus profoundly changes our relationships. We no longer see people as objects. Instead we become brothers and sisters to one another, offering the gracious love of God unconditionally to all.

For Thought

We are one in the Spirit We are one in the Lord We are one in the Spirit We are one in the Lord And we pray that all unity May one day be restored	<i>(chorus)</i> <i>and they'll know we are Christians</i> <i>by our love, by our love</i> <i>yes,</i> <i>they will know we are Christians</i> <i>by our love.</i>	We will work with each other, We will work side by side. We will work with each other, We will work side by side. And we'll guard each man's dignity And save each man's pride.
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The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Crucial Choices

The Scripture passage for the day is drawn from Rueben Job and Norman Shawchuck, A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and other Servants, (Nashville, The Upper Room 1983), 123.

This reflection is from my own devotional exercises for the day. (Rev. Pete Grassow)