

## **“We All Make Missteaks”**

Philemon 1-10; Philemon 10-21

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

July 26, 2015 – 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Our combined scriptures read today are from one of the shortest books in the Bible; in fact, those 21 verses comprise almost the whole book of Philemon. The letter gets its name from the primary person to whom Paul writes. His correspondence is concerned with a single issue: the situation of a runaway slave he has grown close to while in prison.

The exact circumstance of how the paths of Paul and Onesimus crossed is not clear. Perhaps the latter has hidden his identity and simply found work in that jail. Another explanation is that Onesimus came to visit someone else and he and the apostle met through this contact. Both of these would be chance happenings.

It may also be that their connection was intentional on the part of Onesimus. Hearing that Paul was incarcerated there, the slave perhaps seeks him out because they had previous contact. However they have been drawn together, Paul has now come to know this young man very well. Their relationship has become close, much like a father and son.

There's a problem here, though. Onesimus is not legally a free person. He is a slave and, therefore, the property of another. Someone has a claim upon him and, no matter how much Paul has come to depend on Onesimus, this claim has to be dealt with. Ironically, the master of this slave turns out to be one of Paul's own converts, Philemon.

Onesimus had run away from the town of Colossae and ends up in Ephesus where Paul is jailed for serving Jesus Christ. The two must have been surprised to discover how quickly they were bonding together. Paul certainly realizes that he has come to rely on this younger companion.

He writes to Philemon, "When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank God because I hear of your love for all the saints, and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother." The word "saints" here refers to the other believers in the church of which Philemon is a part.

Having expressed these words of thankfulness, Paul now follows with a direct appeal. "For this reason I could be bold enough, as your brother in Christ, to compel you to do what should be done. But because I love you, I make a request instead. I do this even though I am Paul, an old man and also a prisoner for Christ's sake. So I make a request on behalf of Onesimus, who is my own son in Christ; for while I have been in prison I have become his spiritual father. At one time he was of no use to you, but now he is useful both to you and me.

"I'm sending him back to you now, and with him goes my heart. I would like to keep him here with me so that he could help me in your place. However, I don't want to force you to do this; rather I would like you to do it of your own free will. I won't do anything unless you agree.

"It may be that Onesimus was away from you for a short time so that you might have him back for all time. And now he is not just a slave, but a dear brother in Christ. How much he means to me! How much more he will mean to you, both as a slave and a brother in the Lord!"

Here something needs to be said about how Paul viewed slavery. Put simply, he seemingly accepted it as a given in the world in which he lived. It's easy to see why people today find this to be disturbing. How can slavery be right, now or ever? Yet, a subtle, but important, distinction needs to be made. Paul never defends slavery, but he doesn't directly challenge it. Neither here nor elsewhere does he question the rightness or wrongness of slavery as an institution.

For Paul, as for the early believers in general, slavery is regarded as a fixed part of society. It has always been a fact of life. But then, you see, Paul regarded all human institutions as features of a temporary world order which was in the process of passing away. Because he shared the conviction of earliest Christianity that the last days were at hand, the reform of society would have seemed to him to be irrelevant and a waste of time. He had a mission to perform—to call men and women to Christ—and that was all-consuming of the little time he had.

On the issue of slavery we look back and judge from the perspective of our age and what has happened over twenty centuries. We ought not to feel superior to Paul on this point, but try to understand him in the setting in which he lived. There wasn't a society existent then which hadn't been built upon the institution of slavery. The Roman Empire, and all other domains, would simply have collapsed if slavery were to have been abolished entirely. It was that embedded in society.

No, changing institutions wasn't Paul's calling; his purpose was to change hearts. If reform was to occur in the days remaining, it would come about from what was happening on the inside of people and not from something imposed from the outside. Yet, though he doesn't make a direct challenge to slavery in this particular letter, he begins to redefine the relationship of master and servant. This is what Paul puts up to Philemon to consider. "So," he writes, "if you think of me as your partner, welcome Onesimus back just as you would welcome me."

Now these are extraordinary words. A slave was under the total control of his owner. He had no freedom to decide for himself what he would or would not do. He couldn't come and go as he pleased. His life was circumscribed for him totally. Therefore, when Onesimus fled his master he committed a grave offense and he robbed his owner of the gain from his work. He took it upon himself to nullify his assigned place in life. As Paul saw it, he was legally and morally wrong.

Moreover, it may have been that Onesimus was also guilty of taking money or other possessions from Philemon's household. We catch a sense of this when Paul says, "If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, change it to my account. I will repay it."

Onesimus has rebelled against the conventional obligations of a slave, and may even have been a thief on top of that. He's clearly made serious mistakes in his life. Yet Paul asks

Philemon to welcome this man back as if he, Paul, were the one to arrive on his doorstep. If that doesn't change the relationship of owner and owned, I don't know what would.

While the legal understanding in that day of one bound to another is not being altered, their relationship is being changed. As they look in each other's eyes, they will see common kinship in Christ. In brotherly love, Paul challenged Philemon to receive his servant back, to forgive his mistakes, and regard him as an equal in faith. That's a radically new view of the worth of each individual.

Well, we know what it is to make mistakes. We can't live a day without making at least some, and the scars of unforgiven mistakes run deep. Sometimes we can carry those for a lifetime.

Paul addresses Philemon and says, in essence, "You've got a right to be angry. You've got a legal case to seek retribution. You are free to handle this situation any way you wish. But remember how you have been changed through your relationship with Christ. You, yourself, are a new person because you have come to know Jesus personally in your life. Remember, too, that **you** weren't without error before you came to the Savior and he accepted you as a repentant sinner. And would you forget the mistakes you continue to make?"

Friends, to live is to make mistakes. It is part of the human condition no matter how much we may strive to be perfect. History shows us that some of the greatest people have made some of the greatest mistakes. No one can go forward without a trail of mistakes behind them.

So the question is not avoiding mistakes, but facing up to them. And here is the joy in our faith: to know that when we realize and admit our mistakes, God willingly forgives them. That is a an undeserved gift. Two obligations, however, are laid upon us—we are to make restitution to those we have wronged, if possible, and we are to treat sins against us as also worthy of our forgiveness.

Paul's letter to Philemon is about a specific situation which required a response from him, but that's not why it's included in the canon of our Bible today. It's there because it is a letter to us about mistakes and forgiveness, old errors and new starts, being on the receiving end of grace and being on the giving end.

This old letter may seem to be concerned about other people and other circumstances, but read it for yourself and see if it's not also addressed to you.