

Labor Day, which is tomorrow, celebrates the achievements and contributions of workers in America. What selection from Scripture could be more appropriate for the occasion than *Philemon*, our second reading for today?

Philemon offers us a tiny glimpse of what labor looked like under the heavy hand of Roman rule in the middle of the first century. Most people lived at the level of subsistence. Many who did, moreover, were slaves. Onesimus, the subject of Paul's letter, was one of them.

Paul says almost nothing descriptive about Onesimus, except that he has undergone conversion. His change of heart implies a change of status. Now that Onesimus has become a co-worker in Christ, Paul wants Philemon (his master) to see him no longer as a **slave** but as a **sibling**— an equal, a brother in the Lord. This change of status has real-world implications as well: Since the two men are equal before God **as well as** “in the flesh” (v.16), *Philemon should free Onesimus*. Ownership of human beings has no place in the church (Barreto, *Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, p. 615).

Philemon's Legacy

One would think that the Letter to Philemon, which expresses Paul's desire for Onesimus' freedom, would have been crucial for the abolitionist movement of the 19th century. And to some extent it was. Christians against slavery in America saw the letter as “a call to liberation” (*ibid.*, p. 618), the kind to which Jesus gives voice in Luke 4:18 when he says that he came to “proclaim release to the captives” and “to let the oppressed go free.”

At the same time, antebellum or pre-Civil War **supporters of slavery** saw in Philemon a commitment to the status quo. Paul, they observed, did not personally free Onesimus from bondage, nor did he explicitly condemn the system of slavery. If, therefore, the Great Apostle was willing to **send back a fugitive slave** to his owner in compliance with the law and custom of his day, they asked, then are we not obligated to do the same?

Thankfully, those who appealed to Philemon to justify the practice of slavery in America **missed** a crucial part of the letter that abolitionists were quick to highlight: Paul may have stopped short of condemning the institution of slavery in Rome, but he **clearly wanted Philemon to change his relationship with Onesimus such that the latter could now be free**. Let's consider why.

Implications of the Gospel

Most of us are familiar with Paul's claim in 2nd Corinthians 5:18 that if "anyone is in Christ," he or she is a "new creation." Rarely, however, do we explore what this means. According to Paul, God has begun to transform the world in Christ, not just by renewing the lives of individual people but by reconfiguring the relationships that presently exist **between** them. A new social order is dawning, one that would abolish distinctions like "slave and free," "Jew and Greek," or "male and female," as Paul says in Galatians 3:28. This **transformation of the social order** will constitute a new era, a new age. Jesus has another name for it in the Gospels: He calls it the Kingdom of God, the appearance of which will turn everything upside down.

In practical terms, this means that the new creation depends here for its manifestation on whether Philemon complies with Paul's request to **change his relationship with Onesimus**. Receive him back, Paul writes, "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" (v. 16). Notice in this instance how Paul takes the gospel, the good news, to its liberating conclusion by implying, as I said earlier, that "the ownership of human beings has no place in the church" (*ibid.*, 615). The gospel, we discover, has real-world consequences. It's not just chicken soup for the soul! It's good news for the poor, the outcast, and the enslaved! It changes hearts, yes, but as Paul shows us, it should change **circumstances** too.

Be wary, therefore, of those who tame the gospel by spiritualizing it, by confining it to a matter of the heart. This keeps things the way they are. If the gospel *only* changes hearts, the captives in this world do not go free. The oppressed remain marginalized. Everything stays the same. The Kingdom of God in all of its aspects – spiritual, social, and political – never comes.

The Neglect of Philemon

Given the explosive potential of Philemon, why do we so rarely hear about it? Why, for example, does it only appear **once every three** years in our lectionary? The likely answer stems from the letter's length and appearance. "Because of its brevity and the seemingly personal nature of the correspondence," writes Eric Barreto in the *Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, "Philemon has suffered from . . . [serious] neglect" (p. 618). Indeed, at merely 335 words, little Philemon looks more like a **memo** than an epistle. Why should we care about a scrap of paper from the playbook of Paul?

In the Christian tradition, interpreters like Martin Luther and John Calvin seem to be of the same mind. The standard reading of Philemon reduces it to a **short story** about a runaway slave who serendipitously meets Paul, serves him in prison, and becomes a Christian. In response, Paul sends the slave back to his master, also a Christian, in the hope that the two will be reconciled as siblings in the faith. Everyone goes home, and they all live happily ever after.

A fresh reading of Philemon shows us something different. It calls us to follow the example of Paul by working to dismantle the hierarchies that continue to denigrate people today based on their gender, race, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status. We need to familiarize ourselves with Philemon, therefore, to help us affirm the oneness of **all people** in the body of Christ – spiritually *and* socially. Here, then, are few things you might not know about the letter.

A Few Facts about Philemon

First, its authorship is important. The New Testament contains 13 epistles attributed to Paul. The early church arranged these letters according to their length: Romans (the longest) appears first and Philemon (the shortest) appears last. Scholars unanimously agree that seven of these letters, including Philemon, came directly from Paul. Differences in style, tone, and theology suggest the remaining six letters, including Ephesians and Colossians, may have been written **in Paul's name** by his disciples later in the first century.

So, who cares? Why does this matter? It matters because a couple of the *disputed* letters of Paul endorse the practice of slavery! Ephesians and Colossians in particular also reintroduce the gender hierarchy of men over women that Paul **destabilized** earlier in the first century by insisting upon the oneness of everyone in Christ (see Gal. 3:28). But here's the thing: Paul probably didn't write them!

That doesn't mean we should throw these letters out. Ephesians 2, for example, provides perhaps the **best summary of the gospel** in all of Scripture.

In contrast to the letters Paul **actually wrote**, however, the writer of Ephesians also tells his readers that slaves should "obey [their] earthly masters in fear and trembling . . ." (v. 5). What do we do with that? Well, we remember that **Paul himself** rejected hierarchies like master over slave as evident in Romans (which he wrote), Galatians (which he wrote), and Philemon (which he wrote).

Sometimes we have to use these passages against the ones that were attributed to Paul later in the first century in the name of the freedom that comes with the gospel. That's the first thing we need to know about Philemon: **authorship is important**.

Point two: we need to understand the **context in which Philemon was written.** Years ago, a parishioner I served in another congregation told me about a Bible study she attended at a nearby nondenominational church. They were reading Ephesians. When they got to the passage about slaves obeying their masters I cited a moment ago – the room became silent. Why? Because the woman from my church was black. Everyone else was white. Talk about an elephant in the room. After a few moments, the pastor leading the Bible study intervened. “Oh,” he said confidently to everyone, “the word ‘slave’ here simply means employer.”

Quite understandably, that did not satisfy the woman telling me the story. She could not help feeling as if the pastor had covered up something. And here’s the thing: she was right. While Roman society did not predicate the institution of slavery on race, the practice itself was **brutal**. As Brenda Ihssen of Pacific Lutheran University explains, “The life of most slaves in antiquity was generally horrific. Rome spent years fighting thousands of rebellious slaves. Those who did not die fighting for their freedom were crucified. Others were branded on the face as punishment” (*Book of Faith, Philippians*, p. 31). Beyond that, of course, slavery commodified human beings, just as it would later in America.

Consider Onesimus. His name means “useful” in Greek. What a tragic way of reducing a human being to his or her function. Knowing the context of Philemon helps us appreciate what Paul wants for Onesimus in Christ. It also prevents us from whitewashing the endorsement of slavery as it appears in the disputed letters of Paul, like Ephesians.

Point three: we should know something about Philemon is the **legacy of Onesimus.** Outside of Paul’s letter, his name appears twice in the Christian literature we have of the first and early second century. The first occurs in Colossians 4:9 where the author refers to him as “a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.” Here scholars assume that Onesimus formerly served Philemon in Colossae, only to become a co-worker there in the church after Philemon freed him! Philemon, in other words, must have agreed to Paul’s request and freed Onesimus, who now serves as an equal in the ministry. Indeed, the Letter to Philemon probably would not have been included in what became the New Testament if Paul’s request for Onesimus’ freedom had been denied.

So, who made sure to include Philemon among the letters of Paul that were collected for the church by the end of the first century? The answer could very well be...Onesimus! One theory puts it like this: “Onesimus was released by Philemon and

returned to work with Paul in Ephesus, remaining there as a principal Christian figure once Paul had left. He was still there more than a half-century later when Ignatius of Antioch . . . addressed the Ephesian church ‘in the person of Onesimus, a man of love beyond recounting and your bishop” (Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 509).

Might Onesimus be the one, therefore, who, out of gratitude to Paul, gathered all his letters from various churches across the Mediterranean, letters that became what is now the core – next to the Gospels – of the entire New Testament? Think about that!

Our third point is this: knowing Onesimus’ legacy helps us understand the importance of Paul’s letter. If the theory I mentioned is correct, he began as a slave, converted to Christ, became a free man, served as a brother in the faith in Colossae and then with Paul in Ephesus, only to become a bishop who gathered the letters we now have of Paul in the spirit of deep gratitude. Now that’s a story!

Philemon Today

Labor Day, which is tomorrow, celebrates the achievements and contributions of workers in America. What selection from Scripture, as I asked at the beginning, could be more appropriate for the occasion than *Philemon*, our second reading for today? Here Paul helps a slave become free by recognizing his newfound status in Christ.

May we find ways to do the same for others, both in our community and beyond, by promoting equality in the workplace, among genders, and among all races. In Jesus’ name.

Amen.