

## *Open to Blessings!*

*Philemon (All); Psalm 139*

The writer of the letter we heard this morning is very famous for talking about love. Just yesterday at a wedding I said words you probably know, 'Love is patient, love is kind.' And in this letter, he talks about love being a source of joy and encouragement; something that refreshes a heart. Something that frees us. Something that at times is surprising. Which is interesting to say before you write a letter that is the classic passive-aggressive letter in the Bible. I would command you, but instead I will appeal to you. He served me because you were unable to. He is free. You know, I won't even bring up the fact that you owe me. It is the definition of passive-aggressive when you say I won't bring up something I'm going to bring up.

This, dear friends, is our Apostle, our Saint: Paul. He was famous for winning arguments. And when he couldn't quite get there in person because he was imprisoned, he would write these letters. I am going to translate some of the passive-aggressiveness of Paul, but before I do that, I want to remind you a little bit about this man who is imprisoned with Paul; who he speaks so highly of; Onesimus. He is imprisoned for his faith you think, because he is there with Paul? Or perhaps he is imprisoned for something else and came to the faith because of Paul's great teaching. But Onesimus is in jail because he ran away from his lawful owner. In that day and in this there were people who believed that to have help around the house did not come with the need to pay them; and Philemon has had one of his slaves run away. Now this could have been kept secret, but oh no God is hilarious and put the freed runaway slave into a jail cell with Philemon's mentor and teacher, Paul.

Paul who had been teaching Philemon repeatedly how free he was in Christ and how anyone who came to Christ was also free. That their debts were paid by Jesus and the community and that they were all brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers to each other through Christ. Really bad luck for a slave owner. It's bad luck when the person you are most angry at because he ran away and you are losing money every day because he ran away ends up sitting with your mentor, learning about freedom from the best evangelist ever... And so Onesimus is about to be sent back home; home where he is a slave so not truly a home, but the house in which he works. But he comes with a letter, a letter that says, Philemon I need you to consider your decision about how to welcome this person home. As part of our spiritual friendship I need you to look upon him as I do. I need you to serve our faith community and since you could not serve us by becoming imprisoned with us, we need you to serve us as the privileged, rich, free man that you

are. Because from exactly that place you have the power to show people what Jesus was all about. And I need you to choose this freely, for as much as I would love to guilt trip you, and this is me translating the guilt trip, as much as I would like to guilt you, because you know you are freed through Christ, I really would like you to choose this from your heart, not as something you had to do because your minister said so, not something you had to do because the neighbours were watching, but because you were so encouraged and refreshed by love that you are willing to share that. I am asking you to treat this run-away piece of property the way you would treat me. Prepare a guest room for me, means prepare a guest room for this one. And then Paul ends with that lovely, again, relatively passive-aggressive line, and if he owes you anything at all, put it to my charge. It's interesting. Because the only thing a slave can owe a master is unpaid labour, and so Paul I saying; if you will treat this man like a VIP then you will treat me like a VIP and if you ask this man to work without just pay, you are asking me to do the same. Refresh my heart and welcome home this brother.

It would be easy for us to say, well Philemon was a horrible man, isn't it good that Paul smartened him up? Or the other way around; to be aghast that Paul would take a criminal and say; he is a human being, deserving of a guest room and a complete clearing of debts. What we are inviting ourselves to remember though is that Jesus calls us to not go either way of the extremes, but to sit with the love question. What would it mean to be surprising another person with freedom; for that is the power Philemon has. What would it mean to be offering ones labour freely to a friend in Christ instead of being their slave as Onesimus is invited to?

I want to ask you a question and I am not challenging you to do this because four weeks ago I came up with the question and I tried it. And then I thought well you know maybe I will just practice some of the marks of discipleship a bit before I try this one. As you know I was at a wedding yesterday with family where I could have practiced this; God, it was impossible. It was so hard. I want you to take something of which you are completely convinced; the kind of something where if someone starts a conversation on the topic, you just don't listen anymore. Or if you are like me and I had to do this this week, you 'hide' a comment on your social media because it raised your blood pressure so much you can't look at it anymore.

When I become convinced of something, I am convicted. I have a conviction. I am locked up. Even if what I am convinced of is true, the moral right, in the Bible; I am convicted. Because I am in a place where I can not communicate; where I can not freely move and listen and learn. Over the next few months we will be studying the marks of discipleship: Prayer, worship, reading our scripture, developing spiritual friendships. And I think for myself, my final exam in the spring will be to, for seven day, put down a conviction. I am not putting it in the garbage or the recycling bin. I will put it probably on my desk somewhere, but I am going to put it down and I am going to listen to people who are fully convinced of the exact opposite of my conviction. They are easy to find. If you don't have a Facebook account, you can start one called 'I Am Giving Up My Conviction' and everyone will tell you their convictions.

To do all this is like freeing someone you own because that is what Paul asked of Philemon. Philemon had bought and paid for a piece of property and Paul was now telling him to just throw that investment away and instead invest in seeing the world the way God sees the world. Every human being is freed. Every community is responsible to help each other free ourselves and free others. Love so refreshes the heart that we can be encouraged and find hope even during despair and hardship. May God support and guide us as we journey together to be disciples of Christ. Amen.