

# FREED BY LOVE

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Sunday, September 8, 2019

Scripture: [Philemon 1:1–21](#)

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

Today, as a welcome back gift, you get to claim an achievement... You can go home today and say, “I read an entire book of the Bible today.” We will hear the entirety of a “Book of the Bible” called Philemon... which is really a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote from prison to another Christian named Philemon, who has become the leader of a household and thus, in the way of the early church, a house-church community, because Christianity was almost entirely grounded in people’s houses at this time.

You also get to go home and say you wrestled with one of the most difficult pieces of scripture today, because of the subject matter of this letter. In it, Paul writes to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, who had been enslaved by Philemon. Not surprisingly, then, this little book of the bible has been used as the bible often is, as a weapon in the battles of our culture and our nation. For slavery was not just for Paul’s time. This letter came to our shores years and years ago... and was used by all sides to argue for—and against—our sin of slavery in our country’s history.

## SERMON

I mentioned before that Philemon was used by both sides of the slavery debate in the United States, but most especially, the pro-slavery south. It was 400 years ago last month that the first enslaved people from Africa were brought to our shores, beginning 244 years of our country’s foundation built on the backs and stolen lives of men, women, and children, and 156 years of the time after in which we have largely failed to grapple with the truth and the repentance required for that injustice and the racial caste system we have been left with.

The New York Times Magazine has made “The 1619 Project” to document not just some of the history, but some reflections on what slavery has meant... I recommend it to you.

One of the foremost challenges in the text is that Paul does not take a strong stance against slavery as an institution. It has been called the “Pauline Mandate,” because it was interpreted as a justification, not just of slavery, but of the return of slaves... and additional violent, oppressive, and unjust layer to chattel slavery.

Paul is making a particular plea on behalf of Onesimus for freedom... but at the same time, he is returning Onesimus to the house that bound him. Some have made the excuse that as an Apocalyptic preacher assuming that Jesus was to return very quickly, the status of slavery didn't mean all that much to Paul... but it is, I think, not enough to excuse this failure of gospel truth-telling, and it falls into a sad history of the Christian church providing cover to oppression, violence. We cannot escape that Christianity was the religion of the enslaver... and it provided cover to his violence for centuries.

Onesimus's actual name means *useful*. So you're getting Paul's play on words here as he says, "you didn't think he was useful..." but he is... just look at what his name is... Now, of course, Onesimus probably was useful. He must have labored and worked... indeed, this letter wouldn't have been necessary if Philemon didn't have a value he associated with Onesimus, one he wanted to collect. But, Paul argues, as a slave he was useless... but as your brother in Christ, as *my son*, he is very useful.

The scandal of our country's birth, and the temptation to us in smaller ways each day is to view others as instruments of our own fulfillment and success. We have fall back—and still do this day—on binding one another by what we can get from others, rather than being bound by what we are to one another... children of God. So Paul returns Onesimus, but calls him son, and tells Philemon he is a brother.

We know this temptation. We love getting what we want. We like getting it without much muss or fuss... and humans, with all their relationships, are messy. We like to downshift into being "transactional": seeing someone as a tool, or part of a machine, part of a system that we don't have to carer about... it's just there to serve us.

Paul reminds Philemon, you have been transformed by the Christian life I brought you to: fully brought into awareness of the love you were created and shaped by... now you must live it by seeing others as transformed.

It's an interesting challenge for us: we have whole categories of books about self-help (self-transformation) but we rarely lift up the practice of seeing and celebrating others' fulfillment and fullness of life.

We hear more and more how corporations are now big fans of "mindfulness" as a personal practice... it has been shown to make workers more relaxed and thus more productive... they can be less impressed or more challenged by spiritual deepening and transformation that might call into question the very work they are doing. In much the same way that the Christian church was twisted to create a religion that called slaves to suffer in this life for the good of the next, any spiritual program, when limited to the personal sphere can be made to bind us where we are, rather in the world transformed by God's love to be.

But it is clear that all is not well in our working. As the 1619 Project has hypothesized there is something about our markets, in our labor, in our striving that is still tainted by those early days of our life as a nation when we viewed others not as the image of God but as instruments of our own self-fulfillment.  
[1] What allowed us to turn humans into an economic engine still lives on.

The management practices of slavery were cutting art, managing accounts, productivity, and oversight structures that were state of the art. The very first securitized financial instrument in this country? Was collectivized slave debt. The largest spreadsheet of its time? Measuring slave productivity.

We still see it in corporations that install key loggers in their worker's computers to track what they are talking about... In fulfillment centers where all those wonderful brown cardboard boxes that arrive at our houses daily are shifted by workers in oppressive heat, without breaks, without... In one egregious example, a workerr died on the floor... the foreman ordered everyone to keep working around her body.  
[2] There are historical traces of oppression which rest in our modern sensibilities of work.

Occasionally, the gospel breaks out, no matter what you do. Google has been struggling as employees walk out against programs for military drone technology and facial recognition software they view as oppressive and dangerous. We are seeing signs of organizing in industries that have successfully managed to resist unions for decades, mostly spurred by hazardous and unfair labor conditions.

This letter comes to us through the ages, then, to remind us that Paul called us family "in flesh and in the Lord." That we must see each other as God's beloved children, not just for the freedom of others... but so that we will be fully free as well... because we don't have to look hard to find the ways in which our history still holds us in bondage. That how we view others, their work, their labors... either an instrument, or as a beloved creation shapes us, our society, and our future.

The Indigenous Australian artist and activist Lilla Watson says:

*If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.*

This day when we come back together with such joy I give thanks for all the ministry and activity, the programs and the presence that you all share here and in our wider community for our church. But I want you to know the true gifts that we gather here are *who you are* not **what you can do**. Each of you an expression of the new life we know in Jesus, each of you a reminder of the priceless treasure of life itself.

I hope we bring that with us into the world: that we continue to write, to work, to speak out for the liberation of others in labor and in work. That all may be seen as truly human, and freed from unjust labor practices. That all may be celebrated for the gifts of life they bring, more than the productivity they produce.

There is a legend to this letter. It goes like this: Philemon must have received this letter... Must have been transformed by the teachings of his teacher, and the gospel which had freed him in love. Paul says “Confident in your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing you will do even more than I say...” And so Philmon freed his slave. This legend and letter persist, the theory goes, because almost a half century later Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus, closing it by greeting “Onesimus, a man of love beyond recounting and your bishop.”<sup>[3]</sup> A bishop in exactly the right place to gather together the letters of an old preacher of the faith... including this letter, which of which many would have thought not much.

May we strive to be free in love, to never see each other as instruments or tools, but as the image of Christ, shaped by God’s love and power to be a part of creation’s healing. May we do this now, so generations will read of how we were set free from the bondage of self and welcomed into the community of the Holy Spirit as one.

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1. [In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation.](#) ↩
  2. [Miscarrying at Work - New York Times](#) ↩
  3. [Early Christian Writings - Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians](#) ↩