

Jon's Sermon from September 4, 2022

Based on the book of Philemon

“You are a Love Letter from God to the World”

Today, we read one whole book of the Bible in church... the book of Philemon. This is the only time in our 3-year revised common lectionary cycle that the book of Philemon comes up, so I thought I should preach on it today.

Philemon is actually a letter from the Apostle Paul to a small 1st century house church... addressed to its male and female leaders, Philemon, Aphia, and Archippus. Paul is writing from jail on behalf of a man named Onesimus, who has become like a son to Paul during his imprisonment... and a co-worker in the spreading of the Gospel.

So just to get us thinking today, if you were in jail, who would write a letter to? Would it be to those for whom you are thankful for? Would write a letter of apology? A letter of encouragement? In this letter, Paul was begging for the forgiveness of a debt that Onesimus owed his estranged brother Philemon.

Historically speaking, Philemon was used by early Christians to justify slavery. In fact, the Bible does not even prohibit slavery. However, our collective conscience today says it is wrong. You can't read the Bible literally when it comes to slavery. In early 19th century America, some Christians used the book of Philemon as a biblical sanction for American Slavery. Slave owners understood Onesimus to be a runaway slave that needed to be returned to his rightful owner according to slave law.

However, African Slaves in America didn't see it this way. They protested that Philemon must not have been a true letter of Paul because it did not contain a clear proclamation of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus for them and their terrible situation.

But more recently, scholars believe that Paul was simply caught in the middle of a dispute between two brothers, Philemon and Onesimus, who are estranged from each other. Apparently Onesimus failed to pay his brother back a debt. Their estrangement is affecting the whole

Christian community and their family. We know this story all too well, don't we? Estrangement in our families. So, Paul writes a letter to Philemon using Onesimus as his mail carrier... as his pony express. Imagine Onesimus going up to his brother, Philemon, from whom he was estranged to and saying, "Here read this first". It's a letter from Paul. Paul urges Philemon to be gracious to Onesimus and welcome him home. He asks that Onesimus be treated as a beloved brother both in the flesh and in the Lord. The flesh part is the clue that this is family.

In the letter, Paul urges Philemon to receive Onesimus as if it was Paul visiting him himself. He promises to Philemon that he will repay any and all debts that Onesimus owes him and any debt he may incur in the future if he would release him from this debt and let him come and minister with Paul.

This reminds me of Proverbs 22:7 that uses language of slavery for when we are in debt. It says, "The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender." 16 tons and what do you get? Isn't that the truth?

How many of you have debts you are thinking about today? Money debts, forgiveness debts. I know in our household, things have gotten tougher to pay off with inflation. Owing people gives me an uneasy feeling. It makes me anxious. I am afraid that I think more about money and bills than my relationship with God.

In the praise song, Lord, I Lift your name on high, the chorus goes, He came from heaven to earth, to show the way, from the earth to the cross, my debts to pay, from the cross to the grave, from the grave to the sky, Lord I lift your name on high.

We could never repay the debt of our sins to God. But Jesus has atoned for our sins on the cross. He covered the cost. As a result, we have freedom to live and love in this world as forgiven sinners. This is a daily thing.

Our Gospel talks about releasing ourselves from any attachment to possessions that keep us from living out the new reality of discipleship Jesus calls for. Taking up your cross and following Jesus

means that there will be difficult times and suffering in our lives. But the cross didn't stop with the cross. Easter redeemed the cross. In a world that holds tightly to possessions, Jesus' words speak directly to our modern possession-focused world.

For example, I just put a for sale sign on my beloved red Honda Odyssey with 224,000 miles on it. I love that van. It still runs great, but it is time. Marcella saw me put the "for sale" sign on it and said 'I don't want to sale the van.'

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Paul teaches in Romans 13:8, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." The only debt we should owe each other is love.

Finally, think of yourself as a love letter from God sent to the world. You are beautiful and precious in God's sight... always and without exception. God has sent each of us to spread the news of God's love and forgiveness.

So as a living letter, I say to you, "Put a stamp on it and mail yourself out to world in need of hope." Amen!