

Sunday, August 21 / 28, 2016-08-12

St Giles

Living Out the New Life

1. Introduction

Good morning St. Giles. It's good to be with you again. Last month when we were together, we looked at a three part sermon series based on the book of Colossians. In the book of Colossians, we saw that Paul had written out his own theological position on the Supremacy of Christ. And we also saw how Paul wrote to the church, laying out a framework on how the Church ought to live with this kind of understanding in place.

This morning, we'll be digging into the book of Philemon, a one-chapter letter also written by the Apostle Paul. Although Paul writes the letter to Philemon, it is connected to the book of Colossians because Philemon as it turns out, was one of the leaders in the Colossian Church. Think of today's lesson as a bonus in our sermon series in Colossians

And, even though the book of Philemon is short, we'll see that it is rich and full of practical lessons in how to live out our Christian faith as a community of believers. Having friends and community is such an important thing but we'll see from our teaching this morning that being in CHRISTIAN community and

fellowship is not always an easy endeavour. Living out the New Life, this Christian life is not an easy thing.

2. Hook – Vancouver trip – seeing old friends;

A few weeks ago, my family and I had a chance to go down to the lower mainland to visit friends and family. It's something that we do from time to time as Alli was born and raised in Surrey, having went to school in Vancouver and finishing her graduate work at UBC. And, as most of you know, I spent almost seven years living in Richmond and Vancouver as well as being part of the ministry at a couple of churches in Vancouver and in Coquitlam,

In visiting the lower mainland, it got me to reflect a little bit about our family as well. We've moved to Prince George now coming up on two years. In fact, we will have been Prince Georgians for two years next month.

Moving to Prince George has not been my big first move. In fact, moving to Prince has been my big second move.

And one of the biggest lessons in moving from city to city that I've learned is how difficult it is to make really good friends. I think it is safe to say that on average, we get a chance to meet a lot of people on a day to day basis. But in order to meet people, form a friendship with others and have a meaningful relationship with another human being, is not an easy thing.

It takes an enormous amount of energy and time to sit down with someone, have coffee with them, get to know them and begin to care for them.

It takes EVEN MORE energy and time to earn someone's trust, to open up to them to share with them the really nitty gritty things that are happening in your life.

And finally, even when all that is said and done, it takes a MOUNTAIN of energy and time to actually speak into someone's life and call them into accountability and have them know that you love them in that kind of way that they'll actually hear that message and not be offended.

In fact, it takes SO MUCH energy, that we rarely have those kinds of people in our lives.

Yet, when we read the book of Philemon, we see that Paul is doing exactly that NOT ONLY for Philemon, but for Onesimus as well.

3. The Letter to Philemon – is a personal letter, written to the house church that Philemon leads, but really, addressed to Philemon himself

In order for us to get a better understanding of what is going on here, it is important for us to look at the context of the letter in which Paul writes. This letter, written by the Apostle Paul is one that is personal in nature. Paul writes to the churches that have been planted in the Roman Empire, but he also writes letters to individuals as well.

So we know that WHEN Paul writes this particular letter, he is addressing a particular person, regarding a particular issue that has come up. In this case, Paul is writing to Philemon, regarding someone named Onesimus. It's also interesting to note that the church fathers included this particular letter in the Biblical Canon, indicating to us, that even though this letter was personal and written to a particular individual, that the letter's content was actually quite useful in gleaning a greater lesson for all of the church to learn.

4. Who was Philemon? Who was Paul? Who was Onesimus? – the triangular relationship

As we read this letter we need to first ask ourselves three questions.

The first question to ask is - who was Philemon?

Question the second is to ask – who was Onesimus?

And thirdly, you guessed it, is to ask ourselves – who is Paul in the midst of this relationship?

In asking these three questions, we'll gain a greater appreciation of the dynamics that are playing out here.

(A) Who was Philemon?

The first question that we have to ask ourselves is who is Philemon?

In all accounts, we know that Philemon is a fellow Christian that Paul is writing to. In fact in the first few verses, we read:

***¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— ² also to Apphia our sister
and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your
home:***

***³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. –
Philemon 1: 1-3***

From the first few verses, we find out that Philemon is a Christian. In fact, he plays an important part in the Early Church that is being formed. He is a leader

in the Early Church and one that is leading a group of Christ followers from his home in Colosse, the backdrop in which the book of Colossians is written.

Now, when we first hear this, we might think that the Church that he leads is small. But our understanding of house churches is much different than the churches that are being formed during Paul's time. When we hear the phrase "house church", we think of fellow Christians meeting in someone's living room. It might be a small and intimate venue.

However, in Paul's time, it was quite different.

You see during the time that Paul is writing to the Early Churches, these new communities of faith did not have large Cathedrals that they met in. In fact, these new communities didn't even have a building with a sanctuary that they met in. The Early Church met in people's home. The main reason for this is because that the Early Church felt that Christ would return soon and because of this, the need for large meeting places was seen as unnecessary. The house church then was an integral part of the larger body of Christ.

And so, Paul was writing a personal letter to Philemon who led the house church in Colosse, he was a leader and held an important role in the Early Church.

As well, what isn't found in the letter to Philemon is that Philemon is then the bishop of the church in Colosse and according to the traditions of the Eastern

Orthodox church, it is recorded that Philemon was one of the holy apostles that was martyred in Colosse during the reign of Emperor Nero.

Philemon, by all accounts was also a wealthy man. He owned property and it was evident that he also owned slaves. And in particular, as Paul writes to Philemon regarding Onesimus, Onesimus was one of those slaves that was in his service.

And, as Paul writes this letter, it is the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus that is primarily on his mind.

(B) The second question that we have to ask ourselves is who is Onesimus?

As mentioned, Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves. When we begin to unpack this fact, it may be unsettling to think that Philemon, who is a leader of the Early Church would have slaves. But the understanding of slavery in Paul's day is quite different than OUR understanding of what slavery is. Our understanding of slavery comes from our North American history and the American Civil War. Slaves were considered property that can be bought or sold. Slaves had no rights.

In Paul's day, slaves were also bought and sold. However, a person could sell themselves into slavery if they were owing money or had a debt they had to pay off. If they chose to do this, they would be called "bond servants". Slaves could

also buy their freedom as well. In Paul's day, slaves were treated with dignity and respect. Slaves could marry and accumulate wealth. And some masters realized that if you clothed, protected and fed your slaves well that they would in return serve their masters better.

Onesimus was then one of Philemon's slaves. And, although we do not know what caused Onesimus to run away from Philemon, we do know that when Onesimus left, he stole from Philemon.

Because of this, the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus was damaged and so Paul was writing to Philemon to accept and welcome back Onesimus. This was a tall order for Philemon to accept, but it was one that Paul felt was important and so he writes this letter to this fellow brother in Christ.

(C) This third question is who was Paul in this relationship? In asking this question, we want to find out why Paul had a stake in this particular relationship. Shouldn't Paul just stay out of it and mind his own business? This matter should be between a slave and his master after all. But, Paul sees that this was important enough that he should weigh in on the matter.

You see in this particular situation, Paul wanted to remind Philemon of not only his position in the church, but really truly what it means to live out the true

meaning of the gospel. In the writing to Philemon, Paul reminds him of his work in the church by writing:

⁴I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. ⁷Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. - Philemon 1: 4-7

Paul here is saying to Philemon that you are doing good work! You love God's people! You want to see people grow in their faith in Christ! The way you love others is an encouragement to both other people and myself! Keep up the good work!

After writing this to Philemon though, Paul cuts to the chase and he begins to write to Philemon about Onesimus. Paul writes in verses 8-11,

⁸Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—¹⁰that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was

in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. Philemon 1: 8-11

In these few short sentences, we see the reason why Paul has decided to weigh in on the issues between Philemon and Onesimus. Paul wisely writes that he could order Philemon to take Onesimus back, but Paul would rather write an appeal to Philemon on the basis of love that Philemon take back and reconcile with his slave Onesimus. The reason why I would argue that his was wise of Paul is because that even IF Paul orders Philemon to reconcile with Onesimus, this reconciliation would have been false. Reconciliation springs from the heart of both people who are on the opposite ends of the action of reconciliation. To order someone to reconcile defeats the purpose of reconciliation! And so Paul says, no no no, Philemon, consider reconciliation not because I commanded you to, but because it comes out of love.

Paul says - Onesimus is your slave, but when he left you he was NOT a Christian. But I, Paul have met him! And he is now a fellow brother in Christ!

We know that Onesimus has been converted to the faith because Paul addresses Onesimus as his son, which was one of the preferred ways that Paul refers to one who he has shared the gospel with and has disciplined!

And so now Paul makes for Philemon the connection. That both Philemon and Onesimus are much more than just master and slave, they are brothers in Christ.

This shift in relationship is important for both Philemon and for us to consider. This shift is a GAME CHANGER because what it says to Philemon is that as a Christ follower, you need to reconsider how we view the world. If the grace that you preach and teach about is truly from Jesus Christ, then this grace is not available only to you. This grace is extended to other people as well.

In letter to the Colossians, Paul writes,

¹¹ Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Colossians 3:11

In the letter to the Colossian Church, which Philemon leads, Paul already has written to them reminding them that in the Christian Faith, all brothers and sisters, regardless of their “station” in life are all united by Christ. Christ is all and in all, Paul writes and because of this, these kinds of divisions have all ready fallen.

To be included in the fellowship of Christ means that in God’s eyes, we are equal. We are equally forgiven. We are equally baptized into the faith. We are equally raised into the new life that has been given to us by Christ.

5. The Parable of the unmerciful servant

This situation that Paul writes to Philemon about reminds us of a teaching that Jesus gave during his ministry here on Earth. That teaching was read to us this morning and is taken from the book of Matthew, chapter 18.

In that passage that we read, we saw that Jesus was teaching about how we ought to deal with sin and disagreements in the church. In that passage we see that Peter asks Jesus about the issue of forgiveness. And this ought to be a familiar passage if you've spent any time in the church.

Peter asks Jesus - ***"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?" - Matthew 18: 21***

And Jesus answers him by saying - ***"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."*** - Matthew 18: 22

In many of the teachings that I've heard about this passage, when Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness, he poses it as a loaded question. Notice how Peter asks Jesus. How many times should I forgive? Seven times? SEVEN! That's a lot of times!

But Jesus says to Peter, you need to forgive your brother or sister in Christ, not only seven times! You need to forgive the repeat offender 77 times!

Peter begins the line of questioning with counting numbers. He wants to keep tabs, create a ledger of sorts in his forgiveness.

But Jesus answers him, NO! Don't just forgive 7 times, you need to keep forgiving! 77 times he says! But really what Jesus is saying is, you need to KEEP forgiving them until you lose track!

That Jesus is saying is what true grace looks like!

And the parable that Jesus tells hits the point home for both Peter and for us.

In that parable, Jesus talks about how a king was to settle his accounts. And in settling his accounts, he had one servant who owed him 10 000 bags of gold. As the servant couldn't repay his debt, the King ordered that he and his entire family be sold into slavery in order to pay off the debt. As the servant hears his sentence, he begs the king to give him more time! And in hearing his plea, the King not only decides to give him more time, the king CANCELS the servant's debt. The servant is allowed to take his leave, and he does so as a FREE MAN.

As the servant leaves, he sees a person who owed him. And in that debt, that person owed him 100 silver coins. Instead of paying it forward and cancelling the debt, the unmerciful servant goes after him and begins to choke him, demanding that he repay the debt that he is owed. And because that person couldn't repay the 100 silver coins, the unmerciful servant has that person thrown into prison!

As it turns out, there are witnesses. And the witnesses tell the king everything that had happened.

And the King hears what happens and he brings the unmerciful servant back into this court and he says to him:

“You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.” – Matthew 18: 32-34

And Jesus ends the parable with these words:

³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” – Matthew 18: 35

It's not often that we hear these strong words from Jesus. I mean, Jesus talks about the King handing the unmerciful servant over to be tortured until he could pay back all that he owed.

But I believe that the reason why Jesus uses this kind of strong language is because he wants to illustrate to both Peter and to us how serious he takes forgiveness when it comes to the community of faith.

And as I reflect on it, I can understand why he would say this. I mean, if the Church whether we're talking about the Early Church or the Church of today, we are called to be a Beacon of light in a broken world. The Church is called to live differently. We are called to live a transformed life that is like Christ's. And this life is first based on Christ's love for all of us. By extension then, forgiveness is a key component of the Christian life.

The serious language that Jesus gives while he teaches this parable is warranted as a reminder of how we ought to live!

6. Paul's plead – Do it for me Bro! Because I have done it for you. I have shown Christ to you.

And so, getting back to Paul, when he writes this letter to Philemon, he reminds Philemon that he ought to not only forgive Onesimus but to welcome him back to the community. We have to remember that Onesimus had stolen from Philemon. And I'm sure, as his master, he wasn't too happy about that. But Paul does a peculiar thing as he pleads with Philemon to welcome him back. He writes

"¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me." –
Philemon 1:17-18

Paul writes to Philemon that he should charge any debt that Onesimus has on Paul's account. Paul is saying to Philemon that if you are keeping an account of the debt that Onesimus owes to you, put it on MY tab. And then Paul continues and says

"I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self." –
Philemon 1: 19

He says to Philemon, this debt, I'll pay it back, don't you worry. But, if you're keeping tabs, remember that you Philemon, you owe me your very self.

What Paul is saying to Philemon is that if we're talking about tabs and debts, you owe me your very self, you owe ME, because I was the one that shared the gospel

to you. I was the one that introduced you to Jesus Christ. You have received Christ because of what I have done.

In a sense, Paul is saying, look, even though Onesimus owes you because he stole from you, you owe me, because you have found your true self in Christ.

NT Wright says:

“It is this verse that tells us that Philemon had, like Onesimus, become a Christian under Paul’s ministry. He therefore owes Paul his own very true self: the true self which he had found, and become in becoming Christ’s. And this ‘debt’ will more than outweigh any material debts Paul may have incurred by taking on Onesimus’ overdraft.” – NT Wright

And so Paul says to Philemon, you have received the grace of Jesus Christ because of what I’ve done. So forgive! And welcome Onesimus back to community of faith! Do it for me, bro!

In writing this, what Paul is saying is like Christ who has taken on our sin, charge Onesimus’ debt to my account! In this case, I Paul, will be like Christ! This is a huge step for Paul to take. But it is because Paul has received the grace of Christ that he chooses to extend this grace to Onesimus AND to Philemon. In this, Paul wants to model for Philemon and Onesimus how they ought to treat one another

in Christian fellowship. This is Paul showing both Philemon and Onesimus what it looks like to live out the New Life. Because of Christ, we have forgiveness and that is GOOD NEWS. In Paul taking on the role of Christ, we are shown what the GOOD NEWS looks like. WE are to be good news to others!

7. We are called to show love, practice koinonia, practice the ministry of reconciliation – Philemon (slave owner) Onesimus – (slave); they have heard the gospel from very different backgrounds but are called into unity through Christ

In all of this, we have learned a very important lesson from this letter to Philemon that Paul writes. And that lesson is that when it comes to matters of the Christian faith, living in a community OF faith is one that is not easy. In living within the community of faith, we will be challenged because we do not practice our Christian faith in isolation. When we become Christ followers, it is so easy to say, I will follow Jesus. The language of the “personal relationship” with Christ, although true, is only one part of the Christian faith. We are called into Christian community, Christian fellowship as well. And when we enter into Christian community, we will be surrounded by other people who are also broken, but have also received the grace, love and mercy of Christ.

Christian fellowship or koinonia, is a term that is often used in the church. However, when we use the word “fellowship”, it often brings to mind gatherings within the church. In the tradition that I grew up in, it meant that it was a time when young people got together, worshiped in music together, had bible studies and socialized with one another. Koinonia though runs much deeper than that. The word “common” in the English language is derived from Koinonia, and so when the scriptures talk about how the Early Church would break bread, sell everything and share everything in common, this is what the Early church would do.

When we read the book of Philemon, and reflect on the practice of koinonia, the Christian fellowship that it talks about is a very rich endeavour. In fact koinonia can be called a gift, something that needs to be shared with brothers and sisters and Christ and is something that cannot be hoarded over another Christ follower.

8. Conclusion

When we read the book of Philemon, we are challenged with this message of forgiveness and reconciliation. And, upon reflecting on this request from Paul to “do it for me, bro!” we can see that it is indeed a tall task. How is Philemon supposed to do this? Undoubtedly, he has been wronged by Onesimus. Onesimus has stolen from him. Feelings of anger, betrayal and

being cheated I'm sure are fresh for Philemon. But if he is to forgive, and forgive in such a way that he loves and reconciles with Onesimus, Philemon cannot do it alone. He must rely on Christ on this matter. It is only through the grace of Christ that HE has received can he possibly find it within himself to reconcile and welcome back Onesimus into the fold.

In this lesson, we too must place ourselves in the shoes of Philemon. As Christian brothers and sisters, we too must look towards the cross if we are to extend this kind of grace to others in our fellowship. Yet, this extension of grace and reconciliation sets the Church apart in our presence in the world. We too must follow Christ as he has done for us and show others this kind of reconciliation IF we are to model to a broken a world the difference that Jesus can make.

We are called to be ambassadors for Christ, showing the world, no matter how broken and messed up things are, healing can begin through the message of cross.

We are to show the world that this kind of life can be practiced. We are to show the world that it is BECAUSE of Christ, anyone can be forgiven and receive grace. In this, the world can be renewed through the cross.

Amen. Let's read together from Living Faith, section 7.2.1