

Sermon

September 8, 2019

Proper 18C

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Deuteronomy 30.15-20

Psalm 1

Philemon

Luke 14.25-33

Imagine, for a moment, that your name is “Onesimus”. First, get comfortable in how to pronounce it: “Oh-NESS-i-mus”. Now, consider your current situation:

- You are sitting near a missionary named Paul, sitting with him in prison.
- He had come to your town preaching an odd, but compelling message, and he had made quite an impression on you.
- And, he is writing a letter on your behalf to a man names Philemon (“Fie-LEE-mon”).

But there’s a problem:

- You’re a slave . . . a runaway slave . . . Philemon’s slave.
- You may have been Philemon’s only slave, or one of several.
- You had fled Philemon’s household, perhaps having taken some goods or money to finance your flight—underscoring your status as a slave: you have nothing!
- Suspecting that Paul might be someone who might harbor a fugitive slave, you flee to him in Ephesus.
- While with him, you have converted to his religion;
- And, now . . . he’s sending you back to your owner, Philemon.

So, what do you have to look forward to?

- You are being sent, returned to your owner; Roman law demanded that Paul do so.
- As a slave, you are totally owned by Philemon; he can do whatever he wants with you.
- If you had fled Philemon because of harsh treatment, what might you then find upon your return?
- As a fugitive slave, you could be subject to a severe penalty: burning your arms or legs with a hot iron; branding your forehead.

So, what is Paul asking you to do?

- He is, we presume you know, appealing to Philemon for leniency on your behalf, but you have no guarantee that Paul’s appeals will be heeded.

- So, he is asking you, because of your faith, to deny your own interests and to return to a situation where your personal safety may be threatened.
- You would be acting out of faith and obedience.

Now, imagine, your name is Philemon. Consider your current situation:

- You are a Christian, converted by the missionary Paul, who is now in prison for his “anti-social” behavior
- You are probably fairly well-off financially.
- And, you are a leader of the church in Colossae—or at least the church (or a group of the town’s Christians) meets in your house.
- You have been defrauded by a slave named Onesimus, who fled the town.
- If he were to return, you know that you could brand or torture him . . . in short, treat him however you want.

But, then you get a letter from Paul, with requests/instructions:

- You are not to treat Onesimus harshly.
- You are not to hold his theft against him. Either you are to allow Paul to pay the debt, or you are to forgive the loss.
- Indeed, you are to cease treating him as a slave, and to start treating him as a brother.
- In short, Paul is asking you to deny your rights, to ignore common beliefs about justice and social status.
- Or, to act out of Christian love, rather than duty or rights.
- As was the case with Onesimus, you would be acting out of faith and obedience.

Now, let’s shift the context for our “role-playing”. Imagine you are a member of the large crowds following Jesus on the occasion we have just heard in the Gospel lesson. What did you hear?

- You heard a couple of morality/wisdom tales:
 - The value of careful estimating before undertaking a building project;
 - The wisdom of evaluating the relative strength of your military before entering into combat with an opponent.
- But also, to be a worthy disciple, you must hate everyone in your social circle, from family to friends.
- Indeed, you must hate your own life.

This is serious stuff! Jesus is talking about commitment with a capital “C”, total commitment, no turning back. But also, a capital “C” “Choose who you will serve!” is the challenge Jesus is posing, just as Paul was asking Philemon and Onesimus. That question, if we really put ourselves in the shoes of the players of any of these accounts, is also directed at us: “Who will we serve?” “Who will we follow?” “Choose where you will focus your commitment.”

The fact that we are here, today, of course, represents a choice. Most of us have other places we could be, other things we could do. But I suspect that, at root, we are here because we want to serve God, to know God—in some ways to be more complete. To use the language we heard from Deuteronomy: we want to “love the LORD our God, obey him, and hold fast to him; for that means life to us” (30.20). How that spells out for each of us, certainly, is different. For some it’s being lifted up by the music; for others it’s the close connection with like-minded people; for still others, it’s the challenge to see things anew, to view a “promised land” just beyond the horizon. We choose to be here because we want something different. And when we find ourselves differently fed at this table—with the music, the camaraderie, the vision—we are empowered to make a difference.

“Making a difference” was the challenge Bp. Kym presented yesterday to those present at the High Plains and Front Range Convocation of the Episcopal Church in Colorado. The Convocation is the pre-Diocesan Convention gathering of clergy and delegates to Convention where some regional business is conducted, and where we are given a preview of what to expect at Convention in a few weeks. Part of agenda yesterday was to hear—some of those gathered, for the first time—from our new bishop. In her address she picked up some of the themes she mentioned here a few weeks ago (such as “confirmation bias”). She also pointed to Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s challenge to “Walk the Way of Love” through thoughtful, prayerful, engagement with the communities around us. She outlined some areas of focus for the Diocese—about which we’ll hear more down the line—that will also push us forward. In her remarks, I heard a clear exhortation to “choose” something different, something beyond the status quo, to show the world that the “Way of Love” is the way of abundant life, not a life of settling for just what’s left over!

Bp. Kym's address to the Convocation, her upcoming challenge to the Convention (and thus to all Colorado Episcopalians), dovetails in so many ways with where we are at Good Shepherd. We have just finished the "Season of Discovery" in the Priest-in-Charge process, and the "discovery document" will be up on the website this week (we'll link to it in the E-News). With that phase done, we are embarking on the "Season of Visioning". (I mentioned this in my article on the "Field of Dreams" in the most recent "Sheepskin"—I refer you back to that.) We are at the point where we are called to choose where we will focus our energies. Where, through faith in, and obedience to God, we will let go of our self-interest and "status-quo-thinking" and choose an amazing future for us, our children and our neighborhood.

That choice to "make a difference", to "Walk the Way of Love", is not, however, limited to our visioning process and its eventual outcomes. Today, in and after each service, you are given the chance to examine new ways you might be able to serve. Our Ministry Fair will offer the opportunity to talk with folks about all sorts of ways to engage in the work of the Good Shepherd. Learn more about how you might be enriched through service on the Altar Guild or in one of our hospitality ministries, or in the multitude of music offerings, or broader outreach efforts. This is not necessarily about taking on something MORE; maybe it's that season in your life where it's time to change from one ministry to another! You might even have an idea that isn't represented at the tables, and you may not be the only person with that God-inspired passion. Find me and let me know! But, do, please, talk your fellow-parishioners about how YOU can step out in faith and obedience to make a difference.

Moses charged Israel to "choose" life. Jesus challenges us—as did Paul urge Philemon and Onesimus—to do something different. To step out in faith. Engaging in a new volunteer position is one step. Becoming actively engaged in the visioning process is another. But the first step is saying "Yes" to Jesus' invitation to serve others in unexpected ways because of our faith in Him, One who gave his life unexpectedly for others.

Amen.