

September 4, 2016  
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Philemon 1, 10-21  
What a Difference Faith Makes  
Rev. George Ferch

Dear Friends in Christ,

There is a little letter tucked between Titus and Hebrews in our New Testament. It is one of the few epistles addressed to an individual Christian, and arguably the most personal. The Apostle Paul wrote the letter while imprisoned in Rome. This lesson is the only reading from the epistle in all of the lessons the church has appointed for the Sundays of the church year. Not sure why.

The recipient of Paul's letter was the man, Philemon. We learn from Colossians, delivered at the same time, that Philemon was a resident of Colossae in Asia. The epistle is about faith and **What a Difference Faith Makes**. Faith changes hearts. Faith changes relationships.

Paul had quite a dilemma. What to do with Onesimus? Onesimus was Philemon's slave who had run away from Colossae to Rome. God had brought Paul and Onesimus together with the result that the slave converted to Christ. Paul considered Onesimus "his son" in the faith.

Faith changes hearts. Onesimus had been a useless slave who most likely had stolen from his master. Paul suspected he owed Philemon some additional debt. Things were different now, Paul wrote. In a play on words on the meaning of his name, Onesimus means "useful," "Formerly he was useless to you, now he has become useful both to you and to me."

There was Paul's dilemma. "I am sending him-who is my very heart-back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel." Paul wanted to keep his son in the faith in Rome to help him. Onesimus wanted to help because now he was a Christian and thankful to God and to Paul.

Faith had changed Onesimus' heart much as it had changed Zaccheus after Jesus visited his home. Faith also had changed Paul's heart. He could not be selfish. Like it or not Onesimus belonged to Philemon. As much as he wanted, Paul could not hold Onesimus in Rome without Philemon's consent. Paul knew it was wrong to covet and keep someone on whom had had no legal claim.

When the apostle decided to send his son in the faith back to Colossae, Paul relied on the change faith had worked in Philemon's heart; a faith that worked in love. Paul counted on that love to lead his dear friend and fellow worker to receive Onesimus back "spontaneously and freely."

Paul even pointed out how God can use sinful circumstances to accomplish his purposes especially of bringing unbelievers to faith. He wrote, "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother."

Faith changes hearts. It removes our selfishness and covetousness. It makes us think of serving others rather than ourselves. Faith works in love to forgive and to welcome as brothers and sisters those who have sinned against us. What a difference faith makes. Also, faith changes relationships.

The relationship we have in the letter to Philemon is a man who was a Christians and a man who was his slave who now had become a Christian after running away. Note that Paul did not command Philemon to give up his personal property even though it was another person. Paul

had not taught Onesimus that his conversion to Christianity freed him from his bonds. The gospel does not invalidate human ordinances that in themselves do not violate the moral law.

Paul was not out to change social order. He was out to change hearts. It is by changing hearts that we change relationships. Christ who lived and died and lived again for us to redeem us from our sins changes our hearts. Paul wrote to his friend, “I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.” Paul relied on the faith in Philemon’s heart to move him to do the right thing. That right thing was to receive Onesimus back, forgive him the debt he owed if any, which incidentally Paul had offered to cover, and receive him back, “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.”

Philemon would recognize Onesimus’ spiritual equality with him. Onesimus would exhibit his true faith by willingly returning to his master and continue to serve him as best he could if that was his master’s desire. The Bible does not anywhere command us to change relationships with the law. God does not command us to change social orders, end sinful activities with the law or by breaking the law.

Faith in Jesus Christ changes relationships. The Holy Spirit changes hearts. Changed hearts change actions. It is faith that works in love that recognizes wrongs and then gently works with the gospel of Jesus Christ to create new hearts and renew right spirits within. You may have heard the saying, “You can’t regulate righteousness.” Actually, you can accomplish outward civic righteousness that provides some justice and protection. True righteousness, the obedience of the heart, comes only through faith, faith that comes only through Christ’s love on the cross.

With Paul, we are confident that Philemon did even more than he asked. With faith, may the same be said for us in our relationships to benefit and refresh one another in Christ. Amen.

<SDG>