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## *Philemon and the Grace of Free Will*

**A sermon by Dean Sam Candler**  
**Proper 18 – Year C**

I have asked this morning that our lector read an entire book of the Bible. It is not often that any church is able to do that during a regular Sunday morning service. I would wager that some of us have never even heard of this book, much less heard the entire book read.

I am speaking of the earnest and delightful and refreshing Letter of Paul to Philemon, sitting safely between the Epistle of Titus and the Epistle to the Hebrews, where it's been for two thousand years. The book has only twenty-five verses long, and we just read all of them.

Did you get anything out of it? Would it help if you knew who Philemon was, or who Onesimus was?

There's been some talk lately about the history of slavery in the United States, some important talk. Here at the Cathedral, we were glad to observe the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first slave ship to arrive on the shores of North America – or at least one of the first slave ships. But there has also been important controversy about whether that matter distinguished the early American colonies, and then the United States, from most any other country of that time.

So, it's good that the Book of Philemon appears in our Christian lectionary today. It's actually a very refreshing book! Let me tell you something about the two main characters in the Book of Philemon, these ancestors in the faith. Philemon was probably a slave-owner; Onesimus was probably a slave. That's the main thing to remember.

Apparently, this epistle was written by Paul to a Christian named Philemon, who had a church at his house. Apparently, Philemon at one time owned a slave named Onesimus. It looks like this slave, Onesimus, escaped from Philemon, or—at least—was separated from him. Then, the slave Onesimus became a Christian and a companion to St. Paul.

Now, what if you are Paul, the great Christian teacher and leader? What if you are declaring the gospel of freedom in Jesus Christ, what if you are saying –like he said to the Galatians – that “in Christ there is neither male nor female, neither slave nor free,” and then a slave on the loose becomes a Christian with you? What obligation did Paul have?

Was Paul obligated to let the slave, Onesimus, stay free? Or was he obligated to send the slave back to the Christian who apparently had legal rights over him?

This little book illustrates the curious confusion between life in Christ and life according to civilized culture. Christians have always been citizens of two kingdoms: citizens of both the kingdom of God—which we cannot see very well—and citizens of our culture, which we see very well, but whose formation of us we usually underestimate.

Unfortunately, the ownership of slaves has been a dreadful part of human history, a regrettable and tragic part of human history, but one which we cannot deny. As citizens of culture, we participate in many activities—even today—which one day in the future we might perceive as wrong. So it definitely was in the past.

But we grow! We grow and develop in life, and in history. We learn, over generations, better ways to behave as humanity

and civilization. In fact, it is our Christian citizenship which compels us to make changes in our culture and civilization. It was Christian citizenship, and Christian principles, which led western civilization away from the practice of slavery.

Yes, there were plenty of pro-slavery Christians who quoted the Bible in the nineteenth century: "Slaves, obey your masters," the Bible says quite clearly in Colossians 3:22. But there were stronger Christians, more sensitive Christians, Christians more attuned to the Spirit, who realized that the deeper principles of Christianity could not allow slavery in any form. St. Paul quite clearly said two things in scripture: "Slaves, obey your masters," and "in Christ there is neither slave nor free, but you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

In every age, moral questions challenge us to meet a new age with classical principles. But we usually have a hard time determining what is graceful in our classical principles and what is legalistic. At our best, we Christians are able to cultivate those deep, classical seeds of grace which develop into new fruit in a new age.

This Letter of Paul to Philemon actually gives us a glimpse of such moral dilemma. St. Paul realized, I think, that slavery was an institution that did not ultimately reflect the glory of Christian citizenship. But he also knew it was an institution and practice deeply embedded in the culture of the time.

Saint Paul was obligated to Philemon, his Christian brother who had a church at his house; and Paul was obligated to Onesimus, a slave who had apparently belonged to Philemon, but who was now a free Christian.

Paul could have appealed to strict law or to strict grace. He could have said, "Listen, former slave Onesimus, I know you are a new person in Christ, but by law you really have obligations to your old master, Philemon. Why don't you go back and practice your Christianity inwardly but still be under legal ownership of your old master?" That would be strict law; all the requirements of strict law would have been met.

Or, Paul could have appealed to strict grace. He could have said, "Too bad, Philemon, your old slave is a new man in Christ, and he is set free forever. Forget the old system of slave and master. The law is overturned!" If we were talking, today, that's easily what we would say. That is what many great Christians said in the nineteenth century.

But this was the first century. What we have in the Book of Philemon is a small glimpse of Saint Paul trying to answer a moral dilemma with both grace and law. That is often the way each of us Christians tries to answer a moral dilemma. We actually need laws, laws which we can trust and depend upon; and we need grace which always points to a deeper law.

So Paul does something quite interesting in this case. He sends Onesimus, the slave, back to Philemon — but not as a slave. He writes Philemon these words, "I am sending him back to you, no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother." Paul does not appeal to Philemon on the basis of law, but on the basis of love. Listen to verse eight: "Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love."

Paul is asking Philemon as a true Christian to accept Onesimus back as a brother in Christ, and not as a slave under the law. Paul is asking the slave-owner to receive back the slave as a Christian brother, and not as a slave at all. Paul is asking Philemon to make the choice; but Paul is asking him to choose grace.

The brilliance of this move is that Paul neither breaks the law of the land nor the law of the gospel. He says, "Yes, go back to your former home, but with both parties as new people in Christ."

We do not know what actually happened after this letter. Did Philemon receive Onesimus back? Did Onesimus even have the courage to return, daring to be a new man in Christ?

I do not know. But I do know that this strategy of Paul's has merit for any of us who decide moral and social matters as Christians. We definitely need righteous laws, and our country desperately needed the laws that abolished slavery! But the great moral matters of our time are rarely resolved simply by following existing law or even by making new law. Adherence to the law, of any sort, rarely results in new and graceful life. Law does make life orderly, but it rarely sets people free.

What sets people free is the appeal to love, not the appeal to law. When we have children who are misbehaving, what produces the more lasting effect? The threat of punishment or the loyalty of love? Maybe we use the threat of punishment, or the law of consequences, in training. But what produces lasting fruit is the example of loyal love. When children are loved, they begin to behave in the same way as the people who love them.

It is the same with adults, even adults who are acting like children. We do not change selfish and rude and obnoxious adults by becoming just as rude and obnoxious as they are. The better way of encouraging moral behavior is by holding on to people and loving them into it. By continuing to be better people ourselves, by continuing to choose grace, by continuing to choose love.

That's the example that Saint Paul leaves with us today, in this small Epistle to Philemon. This little book is a masterpiece of the grace of free will. It is refreshing! That's why Saint Paul says in the closing verses of the book, "Refresh my heart in Christ!" Refreshing grace does not happen when we are forced into it by law. Grace occurs when we choose. Grace occurs when we choose love, with free will.

AMEN.

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Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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