

**All The Good That We May Do
Philemon 1-21
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This past week, if your social media feeds are anything like mine, they were inundated with adorable back to school pictures of kids from preschool to college. I love seeing these every year around this time, the shocked look on my face mirroring the comments underneath the photos; “They look so big!” “How are they that old?” “Where did the time go?” As if on cue for the beginning of this school year, the weather suddenly turned last weekend, giving us an exquisite taste of what life without humidity would be like once we hit fall.

Also, as if on cue, traffic was notably worse on Monday morning in part because of school buses being back on the roads. I drive by several school bus stops on my way to work and I often think about how such a tremendous act of bravery happens every single day as kids step on the bus. For the students, to venture outside the safety and stability of their homes and families and to begin to make their way into the world. And for the parents, to trust that they are ready for that, and that they’ve prepared them as best they can. We are still a little ways away from that day with our kids, but I fully anticipate some uncontrollable sobbing happening.

I have heard it said that to parent a child is to have your heart go walking around in someone else’s body. This is the precise sense of emotion out of which Paul writes this short letter to Philemon. Listen to his words again. “I am appealing to you (Philemon) for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.” You may recall, from the series we just finished on Colossians, that the two letters are connected. And if you were here last Sunday, Don, when mentioning Onesimus, who is mentioned towards the end of Colossians, said “that’s a sermon for another day.” Well, I suppose this is that sermon

Paul wrote this letter to Philemon roughly around the same time as the letter to the Colossians. A unique feature of the letter is that it is addressed primarily to an individual, Philemon, along with his household, rather than to an entire faith community. We don’t know too much about Philemon with certainty, but it is at least safe to assume that he was from a family with financial means, such that owning slaves was part of their reality. From Paul’s words about him at the beginning of the letter, it is also safe to assume that Philemon had a transformative experience with the gospel, likely as part of the ministry of Paul himself. Now, his home is a place of hospitality and generosity for a gathering of Christians and Paul feels a deep and genuine connection to him. Paul wouldn’t be able to write what he writes without a strong relational foundation.

Meanwhile, Paul has also come to have a deep connection with Onesimus, a runaway slave whose status in relation to Philemon is not entirely clear. Why is he separated from Philemon? Had he committed a crime and fled? Had he stolen from Philemon? Had Philemon delayed in granting him his freedom? Whatever the case, he too had a transformative experience with the gospel through Paul's ministry and had been instrumental in providing care and encouragement to Paul while he was in prison, such that Paul can say he has become like a father to Onesimus.

While the letter includes many features common to other letters of Paul, it has a singular focus. Paul is making a plea for reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus. This is a very big ask, an almost impossible ask. In this situation, the power is clearly in Philemon's hands. He has the wealth and the standing in society, and in all likelihood the upper hand in any legal dispute involving Onesimus. Depending on the specifics, Onesimus's situation could have constituted a capital offense. He has virtually no power in the situation. In the 1st century Roman Empire, this is a pretty cut and dry story. Onesimus has wronged Philemon and he should pay for it.

The Nigerian novelist and storyteller Chimamanda Adichie has a powerful Ted Talk, which you can find on Youtube, entitled "The Danger of a Single Story." In it she says, "Power is the ability to tell a story about another person and make it the definitive story of that person." In the author's own experience she talks about how as a child she told a single story about a particular domestic worker in her family's home; that he was poor and that was all that defined him. Or later on, when studying at a university in the United States, how her roommate awkwardly tried to come to grips with the fact that she could be from the continent of Africa AND be highly educated. Her roommate had believed a single story about what it meant to be from Nigeria.

She goes on to say, "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people but stories can also repair that broken dignity."

What I see Paul doing in this letter, is freeing both Philemon and Onesimus from the single stories to which they are captive. The story of slave and slaveowner. Powerful and powerless. Whereas every force in the social and political world at that time would keep them worlds apart, in their separate stories, Paul calls to attention the fact that their stories overlap because they are both now caught up in the story of God's reconciling love. As he wrote to the Colossians, "through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things." "And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death."

Further, the things that propped up their stories like wealth and status are robbed of their power in the light of the gospel. Remember the words, "there is no longer Greek and Jew, slave and free; but Christ is all in all?" This letter to Philemon doesn't have any of the lofty theology or vivid poetry of Colossians, but it's what you get when you take all of that theology and put it into practice at the street level.

The point of good theology is not to put it in a frame on the wall and admire it. The point of good theology is for it to inhabit our lived experience in the world.

Paul doesn't mention the cross in this letter. He models it. He lives it. He stands in the middle of a broken situation with broken people, and is willing to bear their burdens. Philemon, if Onesimus has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I will repay it. But Philemon isn't off the hook, and I love this in verse 19: "I say nothing about your owing me even your very self" (which pretty much is saying something about it). Oh Paul.

Paul could have appealed to Philemon from various angles: He could have simply commanded him with the authority of an apostle. He could have searched for legal means of advocating for Onesimus. But, because of the gospel of Christ, whom they all serve, he appeals on the basis of love. He never quite comes out and says it, but I think the hints are there. In verse 16, "that you might have Onesimus back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother." And in 21, "confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say." That he would set him free.

Towards the beginning of the letter Paul wrote, "I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ." Imagine all the good that we may do when people see this reconciling love in action. When the single stories people tell about us, that we tell about others, and that we believe; when those single stories are shattered, when slaves are freed and the powerful give up their power for the sake of love. Imagine all the good that we may do. Amen.

References

1. The quote about parenting is attributed online to the author Elizabeth Stone.
2. Chimamanda Adichie's Ted Talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>