

SECOND READING: James 3: 13-18

pg 230 NT

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

A prison letter....FIRST READING: Philemon 1:1-25

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. ⁴ I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all his people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I 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. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. ⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet 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— ¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. ¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰ I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. ²² And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. ²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. ²⁴ And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

“BEING A PEACEMAKER”

Have you ever found yourself between two Christian friends who are not being very Christian nor friendly? Have you ever found yourself between two children of God who are instead of singing in harmony not even singing the same song, or between two who instead of being partners in Christ’s service are foes? Well, about 2000 years ago, the Apostle Paul, found himself in this position, a position of being a peacemaker between a runaway slave named Onesimus and a church leader named Philemon. And in his personal letter to Philemon, we are given Paul’s example from which to learn. We will learn well for Paul followed the example of our Lord, Jesus, the Master Peacemaker!

We need some background information first. Philemon lives in the town of Colossae, nearly 100mi from Ephesus where Paul is under house arrest, possibly in chains. Philemon came to the Faith through Paul’s preaching, and now leads a congregation out of his home. Somehow Onesimus, Philemon’s slave, has run away, probably stolen money from Philemon’s home beforehand, and has found his way to Paul in Ephesus. There, due to Paul’s evangelism, Onesimus has become a Christian as well as an indispensable friend. He actually lives into his name (i.e. useful). Paul refers to him as his Christian brother and child. Then something happens that brings the issue of returning him to Philemon to a head, and while Paul would like to keep Onesimus near, he instead carefully writes a “peacemaking” letter to Philemon. Paul sends Onesimus to Philemon, but does not send him alone. Onesimus is accompanied by Tychicus, a disciple of Paul’s, who is also carrying Paul’s letter to the Colossians.

1. Ok, let’s put our imagine caps on and consider the scene at Philemon’s home when Onesimus and Tychicus arrive. *Philemon is standing on his front porch and sees some travelers coming down the path to his house. As he watches, he says to his wife, “Apphia, dear, here comes some people to see us!” And, as the two watch further, Philemon slowly says, “Ummm, I hope I’m wrong, but that looks...that looks like that runaway, that thief, Onesimus! Is it? It is. It is that scoundrel!” Before Onesimus and Tychicus can make it to the porch, Philemon walks briskly toward him. There is vengeful purpose in his steps. Something bad is*

about to happen. But before words or anything else can be exchanged, Tychicus quickly whips out Paul's letter. Philemon, never taking an eye off of Onesimus, slowly opens it and begins to read... "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker...Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ".

So, did you catch it? Did you see what Paul does immediately to lay the groundwork for his task of peacemaking? (*pause*) He establishes their relationship! He reminds Philemon of who they are to each other. They are colleagues, in business together, so to speak, partners. And their partnership is founded on the Faith they share, a faith which is all about living as people of Christ.¹ Paul reminds Philemon of these things by carefully choosing his words. He addresses Philemon as "*friend and fellow worker*", calls himself "*a prisoner of Christ Jesus*", and, of course, greets Philemon in the name of "*God, OUR Father, and the Lord, Jesus Christ*".

2. Let's imagine again, *Philemon has now taken his eyes off of Onesimus and is engaged in the letter. He reads, "I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for ALL his people and your faith in the Lord Jesus."* This reminds Philemon further that, as Christian partners, we must love, and, in fact, we must love all people as we bring them to Jesus. It's subtle but it's there. It's there in Paul's thanksgiving for Philemon's loving nurture of his own congregation. If Philemon is listening, this cuts the slats of anger out from under his feet, and it guides him to remember that all is all. All people, Jews and Greeks, men and women, old and young...slave and free are the ones whom Christ has come to identify with...not just part but all human beings.

3. *Philemon reads even further, his heart already beginning to soften and, with his mentor's words of admiration, beat rapidly in his chest. He reads Paul's gentle, persuasive appeal... "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love."* So, here's the next thing. Beyond laying the groundwork that Christ's disciples are partners in his work of loving others...all others...the next tool in peacemaking toolbox is to ensure that whatever decisions are made, they are made freely. Paul wants Philemon to decide what to do on his own accord. Christ

¹ N.T. Wright. "*Paul for Everyone. The Prison Letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians & Philemon.*" (Louisville: WJKP; 2002), 201.

does not force us to take on his mission. Neither then can we, as peacemakers, do it. Decisions to reconcile by parties in conflict must be owned. If not, the changes will not be lasting. What Paul is going to ask of Philemon is very difficult, but he trusts that Philemon will act rightly. Certainly, he feels this trust and is already rising to the occasion.

4. *Imagine: Philemon continues reading, his demeanor so much calmer now. His eyes are studying the beautiful lines which simply overflow with love and he begins to think about his opponent, to imagine HIS situation, to get in His shoes a bit. Philemon thinks, “Onesimus has lived a difficult life. He was born a slave. It was simply his lot. But what is that to Christ? We have all been freed by Christ. We’re no longer captive to sin. We are slaves now instead to Christ. Onesimus has come to know this. He’s come to it through Paul’s preaching, just like me. Both of us have been touched by Jesus’ own Holy Spirit!”*

Then Philemon’s eyes well up as he reads, **“So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me... I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self.”** “What?”, Philemon audibly says under his breath. “Charge it to me? Is that what Paul is saying? Doesn’t Paul know that Onesimus stole a lot of money from me? Doesn’t he know that he is under the sentence of death because Roman law says that a runaway slave could/should be severely disciplined, even killed, upon capture? Is Paul, here, really willing to be in Onesimus’ place?”

Yes, this is where the peacemaking rubber hits the road. Paul gets into the gap, into the breach! Because of his bond with both Philemon and Onesimus, and his bond with Christ, Paul can represent Christ, one to the other! When Philemon sees Christ in Paul, he sees Christ in Onesimus! And Paul is willing to sacrifice for Philemon and Onesimus as Christ has for us all. Paul is innocent of the offenses, but yet offers his own money and even his life to make it right.

N.T. Wright says that Paul here “applies the cross”. “On the cross, Jesus hung with arms, outstretched between heaven and earth, making a bridge upwards and downwards between God

and the human race, and from side to side between all the warring factions of earth. Christ's achievement of reconciliation is put into effect when his people follow the same pattern."²

"Of course, I will...of course I will welcome. I will forgive Onesimus,!" says Philemon.

That's a big step...a very difficult one. It reminds me of a powerful story that Corrie ten Boom tells about her experience in learning to forgive her Nazi camp prison guards. She compares forgiveness to letting go of a bell's rope. "To get a bell ringing, you have to tug on its rope for a while," she says. "Once, however, it has begun to ring, you merely maintain the momentum to keep it ringing, every so often pulling the rope." Corrie says that forgiveness is like letting go of the rope. "For a while momentum keeps the bell ringing...old feelings of unforgiveness continue to assert themselves. However, if you keep your hands off the rope, if you affirm your decision to forgive, the bell will begin to slow and eventually stop. Forgiveness is not something you feel, it is something you do. You let go of the rope of retribution."³ Paul trusts that Philemon will let go of the rope and forgive Onesimus.

5. Philemon has been brought a long way. But there's one final step that Paul, the Peacemaker, takes. *Paul's voice is quiet and serious now, in his letter which Philemon is now reading...rapidly, hands shaking.* **"Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask."** Paul assumes Philemon will do more. Christ asks us all, you and I, to do more than just the bare minimum too, to go the extra mile. And indeed, when we are aflame for Him, we are compelled to do whatever we can for his sake and the sake of his coming Kingdom. Philemon knows what Paul is asking...for him to set Onesimus free. *Can't you imagine that there is a long pause as Philemon contemplates this? Owning slaves was as natural as owning a car or a TV set for us today. Philemon's livelihood depended on slaves' work, and he would be a laughing stock in town for freeing a slave who'd run away and stolen from him. "Could he do it? Could he do it for Onesimus, for Christ, for all those of his church who are watching?"* Well, the fact that Onesimus is believed by many to have later become the

² N.T. Wright.

³ Steven Platt. Sermon: "When Hurts Run Deep". SermonCentral.com. (Accessed 8/24/18).

bishop of the Church of Ephesus⁴ tells us that the only bell which continued to ring in

Philemon's life was not the one of unforgiveness and retribution, but the beautiful chime of mercy and grace. *"Aphia, Aphia," Philemon must have yelled, "we need make the guest room ready. Onesimus, our brother, is tired after his long journey."*

Friends, Paul's letter goes on just a bit more. After:

- establishing his relationship as a partner in Christ and the partnership as one which is based on loving all others,
- demonstrating trust that decisions will be made in freedom,
- getting in the gap, sacrificing as Christ, one to the other, and
- making clear that as Christ's own we are compelled to do more than the minimum...

after all of this, Paul tells Philemon that he will personally visit him soon. He sends greetings

from those in Ephesus and then ends the letter with, **"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be**

with your spirit." Brothers and sisters, in Scripture James says, "Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness." (Ja 3:18) Doing works of justice and mercy and peace is our mission. It is our calling as Christ's own. And if we take this work for our world seriously, our world which needs peace so very much, we need begin at home, being peacemakers in our own relationships with others around us. We need not shy from it, but apply the lessons learned from Paul's letter to Philemon so long ago, and from Paul's teacher, the Master Peacemaker.

Let's go then, in joy and peace. "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirits".

Amen

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Onesimus> (accessed 8/25/18).