

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Something to Sacrifice

Philemon

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There are three main characters in today's New Testament reading. Three main characters, all very different from one another, whose lives here intersect. The drama of the intersection reveals the heart and character of the gospel.

Paul, the apostle, authors the letter. Philemon of Colossae, the recipient of the letter, is addressed directly by Paul. Onesimus, an escaped bondservant to Philemon, has been sent back by Paul to Philemon, holding the very rolled up scroll that addresses his status.

Three main characters, each very different from one another: Paul, the respected apostle; Philemon, a church leader of the Colossians for whom Paul gives thanks for his love and faith. He has given Paul much joy and comfort. He has refreshed the hearts of the saints. And Onesimus, who appears to have run away from Philemon and gone straight to Paul, where he began a warm friendship, and now he's come back to face whatever he's going to face.

In this short letter tucked into the New Testament, Paul addresses Philemon about Onesimus. "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him here, but I'm sending him back to you."

It's here that we begin to see what they share in common. Each of them must relinquish something for themselves and for the others to know and follow Christ. They each have to give something up, to let something go. This giving away is at the heart of discipleship, just as we hear in our gospel reading. There is a cost to discipleship that is most often born out of relationship with others.

From the beginning, we see Paul relinquishing something special to him, Onesimus's companionship, support, and comfort. Paul sees him like a son, and prison is a lonely existence. In the First Century, it was a dark and dank cell, in Rome or possibly Ephesus—you never know where Paul is in prison.

Paul is always getting himself in trouble. He got himself in trouble quite a lot for preaching the gospel and was willing to give up his freedom for it. What got him in trouble wasn't so much that he was preaching interesting ideas about God becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ, but those ideas about God had real-world consequences. And so in Ephesus, he got in trouble because his preaching about the One True God was putting the idol making workshops out of business. In Rome, he got in trouble because

his preaching about the Lordship of Jesus was a direct challenge to the rulership of the Caesar. In Jerusalem, he got in trouble because his preaching of Jesus as Messiah threatened the authority of the rulers. In other words, there's no daylight between preaching and meddling.

The gospel isn't just about what your thoughts are about God alone; it is directly related to how we live and have relationship with one another. Jesus speaks of the cost of discipleship amidst the entanglements that constitute our lives—the good ones—our families, our vocations, our possessions, our preferences and self-interests. At every turn, Jesus calls us to follow him, and to be willing to hold lightly the things we think are very important for that which is of ultimate importance. So at hearing his call, fishermen left their boats; tax collectors walked away from their income; women left the safety of their homes and communities. Paul left behind a respected life as Pharisee. Not everyone drops their nets and totally walks away from their work; not everyone, not even amongst the early disciples or early church, gives away *all* their possessions, but Jesus reframes our relationship with everything and everyone through the power and promise and cost of the gospel and the cross and the high call to shared life with others in his name.

Shed a tear for Paul if you'd like. Alone and suffering, an old man in a prison cell, watching his companion walk away. But Paul's shedding no tears for himself. He's given up so very much, but what he lets go of always is for the goodness of knowing Christ. What he finds is the more he relinquishes, the more of Christ he knows. He's learned this over and over again. Now it's time for others to learn it, too—like Onesimus, like Philemon, like the church to whom the letter is also sent in the hand of Onesimus.

What Paul asks of Onesimus is no small thing. Go back where you came from. It looks like Onesimus has run away, a runaway slave. Slavery then wasn't like it was in the United States, so that's why many English translations call him a bond-servant instead of slave to help us know the distinction between the two. But neither is where you want to be. It appears he's run away from his bondservanthood to Paul, perhaps seeking freedom? Or apostolic consolation? Or blessing? The gospel he knows sets men free. In Christ, there is no slave or free. Paul wrote that. But now Paul's asking him to go back and to carry this letter with him.

Did he know what was in the letter? I like to imagine he didn't, and so he carried it with only a deep trust in his friend, Paul. Sometimes we have to go back to face relationships we've broken. Paul doesn't condemn him for running away from his servitude, but he does send him back right to the situation he fled from. Don't turn this into abused spouses must go back to their husbands or runaway slaves in Texas or Mississippi were wrong to run away to Canada or Mexico. Those are misreadings and abuses of this letter and scripture as a whole. Read it instead as the face put on the gospel that as Paul was willing to release something big, so was Onesimus—his independence. Respect him for it, admire him for it. Sit at his feet and learn from it. In the way of Jesus,

there is a higher good than even our independence; to trust other people to seek your good while you seek theirs.

Onesimus' return carrying a letter from Paul meant Philemon faced a crossroad, too. He, too, was asked to give up something big for something good. This is what the letter is all about.

Philemon, here before you stands Onesimus. He's back because he made a choice to come back and now you have a choice to make, too. I could tell you what to do—free this man and embrace him as a brother in Christ. But I won't tell you you must do that. Instead I'm going to ask you, on your own free will, on your own understanding of the good we share in Christ and the call of Jesus on your life, in the person you have become in Christ who set you free—release this man from your bond and embrace this man in your love.

Philemon's choice is the face of the call of Christ to forgive like the father of the prodigal son. He is the face of releasing resentments and anger and pride, if he'll do it. Paul writes, "If this costs you anything, charge it to me, I'll pay it all." But, you know, Paul's in prison. How's he going to do that? I picture Philemon here in this moment as a man in a cauldron of inner conflict. A good therapist would be really nice for him right now to help him sort through his feelings. But such a luxury isn't his. Instead, all he has is his church community, standing with him. There are 3 main characters here, but actually there are four: Paul, Onesimus, Philemon, and the church community of Philemon, hearing this word with him and standing now with the two of them.

I'm glad this was addressed to the congregation and not just to him, not to embarrass him or put him in an awkward position, but because not only do we need accountability, but we also need support. We need to know we're not doing this life alone; when we sacrifice, when we relinquish anything that we hold dear to make sacrificial gifts, to relinquish our anger or our resentments to others that we've been harboring, or our power or our pride, or anything that Jesus is calling us to let go of—it's essential to know we don't do so alone. Philemon has been breaking the eucharist bread with these people. They know him; he knows them. They're in this together, in the struggles and the rejoicing. And in the community that was made and is being made and is being remade in the way of Jesus, who became a servant to us all.

Neither scripture nor history tells us what Philemon did next, but what I hope he did, was wrap his arms around Onesimus, and say "Welcome home, my brother, I forgive you. Will you forgive me? Come on, let's go to the Table and share it together. We need this, and we need one another."

I hope that, and I believe it. If scripture and history don't tell us what happened, I can make it up. It happened because the gospel calls us to sacrifice, and it's happened thousands and thousands of times between brothers and sisters since then in congregations and communities and families around the world—a releasing and a letting go which makes us whole. And because it still happens today. The gospel calls

us to take up our cross, to relinquish something big for something good. This little letter puts a face and name on the gospel for one man and his community. In each life, there is a face and a name for living out of the gospel, a moment and a crossroads to follow the way of Jesus.

So, May God give us grace to recognize the moments when they come, and in them, give us the grace to have the heart of Paul, the courage of Onesimus, and the spirit of Philemon. That we may share together the life of Christ more and more.

Amen.

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