

## ***MY BROTHER, THE SLAVE***

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

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Deuteronomy 26:4-11; Philemon

***“Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while,  
so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than  
a slave, a beloved brother...”***

Philemon 15-16

They say letter-writing is a lost art; and perhaps it is. We live in an era of texts, tweets and e-mails: instant communications, too-often lacking in thoughtful reflection, or even consideration for the feelings of others.

It didn't used to be that way. Once upon a time — and this, before there was a telephone in every home, let alone a cell phone in every pocket or pocketbook — letters were the thing.

My grandfather — who grew up before even the telephone was widespread — was famous for his letters. We used to say of him, in the family, that “Grandpa doesn't write letters — he writes epistles.” All his grandchildren, I'm sure, still cherish certain letters they received from him over the years: inscribed by a fountain pen in an flowing, elegant hand.

Some personal letters are famous in history.

Abigail Adams kept up quite a correspondence with her husband, John, during the many years they were separated during the struggle for independence.

In one famous letter from 1776, she had this to say: **“I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors.”**

It was more than a century before women in America would gain the right to vote, but Abigail was lobbying for women’s suffrage.

I’m thinking also of the letter Abraham Lincoln wrote to Mrs. Bixby of Massachusetts, a mother who had lost five sons in the Civil War. It contains this oft-quoted line: **“I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.”** (Historians actually think Lincoln’s personal secretary, John Hay, may have written the letter, but no matter: Lincoln signed it.)

Then there’s the letter Albert Einstein wrote to President Roosevelt in 1939, just a month before the Nazi invasion of Poland. It contains these chilling prediction: **“...it may become possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements would be generated. Now it appears almost certain that this could be achieved in the immediate future. This phenomenon**

**would also lead to the construction of bombs..”** Einstein was warning the President that the Nazis could well be on the road to building nuclear weapons. It led, eventually, to Roosevelt authorizing the Manhattan Project.

All three of these were personal letters. When we read them today, we’re very literally going through someone else’s mail. But even so, they belong to the ages.

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There are a few — a *very* few — personal letters in the Bible. Paul’s most famous letters, of course, were written not to individuals, but to churches. They were meant to be read aloud to God’s people as they gathered.

Not so with the letter I read for you today: the letter to Philemon.

So, who is this Philemon? He’s a Christian, a friend of Paul’s. And he’s got a problem.

The problem is named “Onesimus”: a Greek name, meaning “useful.” Now, that may seem a peculiar name, but it’s not so peculiar when you realize it’s a slave name. Just as in the American South, slave owners in Roman times believed they had the right to choose names for their slaves: much like people today name a dog. Here in America, untold numbers of kidnaped Africans — who already had perfectly fine names from the old country — were renamed at the whim of their

masters either before or after they left the auction block. It was a dehumanizing custom — think “Stepin Fetchit,” the name of the first African-American film star, who specialized in playing servants. The name “Onesimus” — “Useful” — declared to all the world that here was a man who was a Stepin Fetchit, because he was owned by another.

Onesimus is owned by Philemon, but he’s staying, for the moment, with Paul. How he got there — or even where “there” is, exactly — we don’t know. All we know is that Paul is in prison, and Onesimus is staying there with him.

In prisons back in those days, live-in visitors were allowed — even servants, if the prisoner were well-to-do. Most likely, Paul was under a kind of house arrest, and Onesimus was helping him.

The problem is, Onesimus was a runaway slave. He became so enamored of Christianity — which he may have learned from Paul himself, in the house of his master Philemon — that he ran off to be with the apostle.

That sort of thing didn’t go over well in the Roman Empire. Household slaves were property: like furniture, they were supposed to stay home. And so Paul writes this letter, and sends none other than Onesimus himself to deliver it.

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The letter to Philemon has had a checkered history: it’s been misused, in

some times and places, to justify slavery. It's true: Paul does send the runaway back home. That fact was not lost on pro-slavery preachers in the American South.

Take a closer look at the letter, though. It reveals that Paul has something very different in mind. Far from advocating slavery, he seeks to undermine it at the very foundation.

Writing as "an old man, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus," Paul appeals to Philemon on behalf of a man he calls "my child." And then he identifies himself as the slave's adopted father. He encourages Philemon to receive Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother."

"Welcome him," Paul entreats, "as you would welcome me." Then, like the good Samaritan in Jesus' parable, he offers to personally make good for any expenses Onesimus has caused his master by running away: to "pick up his tab," as it were.

It's true: there's no outright denunciation, here, of slavery as an institution. But Paul knows he'll catch more flies with sugar than with vinegar. He's concerned not only with winning Onesimus' freedom, but also with the state of Philemon's heart. He wants to win that heart, not overpower it.

In verse 21 he speaks gentle words of encouragement, words that reveal how much he trusts Philemon: "Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you,

knowing that you will do even more than I say.”

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Paul’s letter is a deep act of trust: on three levels. First, he’s trusting Onesimus — who’s presumably already run away once before — to faithfully deliver the letter and not run off again. Second, he’s trusting Philemon — who, under Roman law, has every right to punish Onesimus harshly, to understand what it means to be Christ-like. Third, he’s trusting God that somehow this wild gambit will work out to some good end.

So, how *does* it work out? What about that slave Onesimus, when he shows up trembling at Philemon’s door, Paul’s letter in hand? Does his master take Paul’s advice, treating him as a brother — maybe even freeing him from slavery? Or does he clap the miserable runaway in irons?

The frustrating thing is, we just don’t know. There is no book of Second Philemon, no sequel to tell us how the first letter was received. We’d like to think Philemon relented, forgiving his slave for running away. But we can’t be sure.

There’s one hint, however, that suggests Philemon may possibly have had a change of heart. Fifty years or so after Paul is writing, the church father Irenaeus is composing a letter of his own, to the church at Ephesus. In that letter, he mentions the name of the Bishop of Ephesus, a man he highly respects.

That bishop's name is Onesimus. Now, we can't be sure he's the same Onesimus, but I like to think he is. "Onesimus" — the useful one — is a slave name, after all. There can't have been so many people, in those early centuries of the church, to rise all the way from slave to bishop.

I like to imagine that runaway slave, weak with fear, showing up at the door of his master to hand over Paul's letter. His master breaks open the seal, and reads. In that letter he sees such love, such sensible reasoning, that he decides to free his slave, acknowledging him as a brother in Christ.

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So, what relevance does this ancient letter, about an obscure subject — slavery — have to us today?

Two things I have to say on that subject: the first is a historical observation, the second a contemporary one.

First, the history. New Jersey history. Lamington history.

When I was a kid growing up in New Jersey, we studied state history. I don't know if I was taught this, or just assumed it, but I was under the impression that when New Jersey regiments traveled south in the Civil War, to fight at places like Chancellorsville and Shiloh, they were fighting the good fight, morally speaking. They were coming from a state that no longer had any slaves to free the

slaves in a state that still did.

But that was wrong. It's true, the New Jersey Legislature passed a law in 1804 that abolished slavery. But here's the thing. It was a gradual abolition. Slaves could no longer be imported into the state, and children born to slave parents were not considered slaves — but their parents still were. Those children born after 1804 were “apprenticed” to the owners of their parents until they turned 21 (in the case of girls) or 25 (in the case of boys). So, their parents' owners still got free labor out of them as young adults.

In 1846, the Legislature passed another law that said slavery was abolished: but those who were still slaves at that point were considered “apprenticed for life.” It was mostly a change in terminology. New Jersey laws protected the financial investment of the owners in their slaves — or, later, their so-called apprentices — more than they protected the human rights of the slaves themselves.

It was not until 1865, at the end of the Civil War, that Federal law — the Thirteenth Amendment — abolished slavery everywhere in these United States.

The wonderful, historic building in which we're worshipping was built in the 1820s. Was slave labor used in its construction? I'm not sure we'll ever know, but it's very possible that it was — considering all the slaves who worked in agriculture in this area. Now, isn't that a humbling thought?

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Finally, the contemporary observation. For many years, companies had “personnel departments” to hire and fire employees and manage their benefits. Then, the name shifted to “human resources” — or, simply, HR.

Recently, though, some big companies have started renaming their human resources departments. What they call those departments now is “human capital management,” or HCM for short.

I get it. I understand what they’re up to. They want to reassure their stockholders that all their assets, human and material, have value, and they’re going to guard that value carefully to keep costs low and profits high. But I’m afraid — maybe you are, too — that something’s been lost in the gradual transition from personnel to human resources to human capital. “Personnel” at least sounds personal. “Human capital” sounds a lot like property.

The advice Paul gives to his fellow Christian, Philemon — in a world where slavery was commonplace and universally accepted — is to treat his slave, Onesimus, like a brother. It’s a particular application of the radical ethic of Jesus: that we love our neighbors as ourselves.

What if those Christians who employ or supervise others in the workplace were to take Paul’s advice and treat their subordinates more like brothers and

sisters? Wouldn't the world be a better place?

I think you know the answer.

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We're going to sing, now, a great old hymn — one that had special meaning to people here in these United States who remembered the experience of slavery. It's "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." I learned it as a camp song.

What the song's about, on one level, is the ascent of the prophet Elijah into heaven in a fiery chariot. You can read about that miracle in 2 Kings, chapter 2. Beyond the story of Elijah, it's got all kinds of imagery about leaving this earth and journeying to heaven.

But it's got a deeper level of meaning. The hymn speaks of crossing the River Jordan. In many African-American spirituals, that's a code word for the Ohio River. Runaway slaves leaving the South aimed for that river: knowing that, if they managed to cross it, they'd be in free territory at last. "If you get there before I do...tell all my friends I'm coming too."

Let's sing together this song of freedom in Jesus Christ: freedom to live and love and care for all our brothers and sisters!