

Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for the long term, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

*Philemon 15-16*

### **Change in Relationship**

One thing mainline Christian churches don't emphasize enough is the act of conversion. Though we frequently talk about the new creation, or the new life in Christ, we tend to live as traditional Christians—that is, we are born into the faith, grew up in the faith, and stay with the church that we are familiar with. We do not expect people to make drastic changes in their lives based on their faith. Since many of us were baptized as infants, we do not remember the dramatic moment when we are born again; nor did we all have a moment when we remember giving our lives to Christ, or receiving Christ in our hearts. Some even doubt the authenticity of such moments, and prefer the life of faith to be one of slow, gradual growth rather than a sharp turn or conscious rejection of our past life.

Personally, I don't think our life in Christ follows any single pattern. For me, what's important is not the formula or path but the results: our trust in God to guide us rather than wealth, power, or fear; our ability to shed hurtful behaviors or addictions; the ways we allow God to work through us; the message of Christ's love that we share in word and deed.

But it's helpful to have a touchstone, a way of reminding ourselves that we are not just the same old person we always were, that God has claimed us and we have heard God's voice. Some start wearing a cross or get a tattoo; some change their name; some remember their spiritual birthday. And what's just as important, their faith community nurture the change by recognizing spiritual gifts, or offering opportunities to practice those gifts, or reflect back to them the growth in faith they see, or identify potential new gifts and new leadership that they never recognized before.

But I have noticed that even when people are making positive changes, long-time companions might fail to reinforce those changes, but instead question the growth or even ignore the changes entirely. I remember a young man I mentored when I was at Apple Computer, who had some odd personal habits that I needed to identify for him to reject. He was thankful to be told, and shed the habits that were problematic for his career—and yet another manager would continue to joke about those old habits. Watch out when people don't want to risk allowing new or younger church members to take on leadership roles, or are quick to remind folks about when the new deacon was new to the church and didn't even know the Lord's Prayer!

One thing I have always loved about the church is how we can see people as God's children rather than however this broken world sees them. Jesus attracted traditional enemies like tax collectors and outcast women and Samaritans and church leaders and wealthy widows, and told them to be family together. And in Paul's letter to Philemon, Paul speaks on behalf of Onesimus, who escaped from under Philemon, and asks Philemon to receive him back, and not as a slave, but as a fellow brother in Christ. Quite the change!

These changes in labels can represent changes in relationship, including reconciled relationships. I have been working on a sermon that I will give next month when several of us from the Synod will visit our sister presbytery in Korea, Jeonjoo Presbytery. I have always thought that if I had the

opportunity to speak in Korea, I would feel the need to offer my remorse for the brutal oppression of Koreans by the Japanese during World War II, but also contrast those crimes with a sense of oneness, especially with current-day American-born Koreans and Japanese. So we can go from mortal enemies to siblings, especially siblings in Christ.

On a more local level, Westminster Presbyterian Church in Pasadena is using a different label for the other churches and organizations using their campus—ministry partners. This is a shift from “landlord-tenant” language, and I am very happy to see a church be so intentional in offering a more egalitarian, shared ministry relationship rather than that of “have” and “have nots.” One of the churches now worshipping at the campus is Altadena Community Church, the UCC church whose building burned down in the Eaton Fire. What is interesting is that this church was started as a break-off from Westminster 85 years ago, when a pastor was pushed out for being too liberal. I expect that the relationship between the two churches wasn’t all that friendly in past decades, but yesterday the leaders of Altadena Community were extolling the great welcome Westminster offered them at a time when the church was most vulnerable.

I believe that one of the great witnesses we Christians can offer a hurting world is reconciliation. May we find ways to practice reconciliation, and change our labels and our thinking, from landowner and renter, to partners . . . from oppressor to friend . . . from outcast to leader . . . from enemy to family. Thanks to the love of Christ, this is possible—so let us live into the change that God wills for us.

Blessings,

*Wendy*