

“How Can We Repay?”
By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Galatians 3.19-29
Philemon 1.1-21
September 4, 2022

Our main text for today is from the lectionary readings. You might remember that the lectionary is a three-year cycle in which reformed preachers can choose from four or five texts on any Sunday and the goal of the lectionary is to go through as many scripture passages as possible in those three years. Clearly, not everything in the Bible makes it into the lectionary. Even though this passage is from the lectionary it is not read very often. This might be because it is a very short book of the Bible. It might not be talked about because it addresses slavery and not in a way that society approaches the topic these days. Plus, this is an uncomfortable topic. As I was writing the sermon, I realized that in eleven years of ministry I don't think I have ever preached on this passage. It is difficult to talk about the Bible and slavery. The Bible doesn't outright condemn it and white colonizers used the Bible as justification for slavery when they occupied this land. But knowing the inequity in our country and knowing that we are committed to being a Matthew 25 congregation we know the importance of having these conversations.

We will start with a list of characters in the story and a little historical background. Paul is the one who was writing. Paul wrote many letters to various communities in early Christianity. Paul was born Jewish and had a vision one day along the road. Before this vision Paul was known for persecuting Christians and then he converted to Christianity. I have found that you either love him or you hate him. This week I saw an interesting and funny and strangely accurate meme on social media that summarized Paul's letters. It read: “General Pauline letter outline: Grace. I thank God for you. Hold fast to the gospel. For the love of everything holy stop being stupid. Timothy says hi.” This is funny because Paul really does all these things in his letters, offering greetings to the community, lifting them up because he was quite good at the sandwich method. The sandwich method is when you offer a positive or compliment, then a challenge or criticism, and then another compliment. Then, he always threw in that Timothy sent his own greetings. I find this funny because here Timothy is also a character in the book of Philemon.

Timothy was a friend and close confidant of Paul who traveled with him and preached and taught as well. Philemon is referred to in the scripture passage as Paul's coworker. He is a partner and a friend. Most likely we can assume that because Philemon was so wealthy he was sending Paul money.¹ This allows us to see the power dynamic that is happening. Paul might already feel a sense of being indebted to Philemon. Apphia is mentioned and she is Philemon's wife. Archippus is a church leader in Philemon's community. Onesimus is someone Paul met while he was in prison. Onesimus was enslaved by Philemon. Onesimus ran away and was caught which is how he ended up in prison.

This set us up for the scenario. Paul was in jail and he met Onesimus in jail. At some point they connect that Paul is friends with the person who has enslaved Onesimus. They connect that Paul financially benefits from the person who has enslaved Onesimus. What we know is that

¹ Fred Craddock, John Hayes, Carl Holladay, Gene Tucker, eds. *Preaching Through the Christian Year, C*. (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1994), 400.

Paul convinces Onesimus to convert to Christianity. We do not know what faith if any Onesimus practice before or how this conversion happens or if Onesimus feels pressured. We do not hear Onesimus' side of the story.

Dr. Miguel De La Torre offers a rewriting of this book from Onesimus's perspective in *Unsettling the Word*. In this version he talks about a man from Vinales, an African and indigenous community in Cuba. He describes the options of staying as an enslaved person or escaping to a safe community. Dr. De La Torre points out that Paul and Philemon "worship the god of the empire."² The empire is anyone who has the control and power, specifically an oppressive power. I think this rings true today as Christians have the loudest voice in our country and the most religious freedom and Christian nationalism is on a rise. But I think this is not the faith that Jesus envisioned. He attempted to overturn the empires. He sat with those in the margins. I think sometimes Jesus would look at pieces of Christianity that we have created today and shake his head. Dr. De La Torre ends his piece by wondering if we were in Onesimus' place would we run away? Would we convert? If we were Paul would we force him to return to Philemon?

Paul tries to change the dynamic. I don't think that this is enough though. He claims reconciliation but reconciliation without reparation or even a conversation does not make an impact. It does not acknowledge the pain experienced. Paul offers to pay Philemon for his losses but what about the great loss Onesimus has experienced? What about the loss of his family? Of his dignity? Of his autonomy? His freedom? Paul also never denounces slavery. Perhaps the silence is worse. Neutrality does not take the important action of saying this is wrong and needs to end. That the enslavement of people is never right.

We also never here on Onesimus' story or voice. This week at the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program we talked about conflict. As we approach our trip to Ireland we have been reading about the Troubles and the conflict between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. There are various levels of conflict. We all experience conflict. One of the things that we discussed is that conflict in and of itself is not a sin. It is often a disagreement of opinions, which is natural and shows the diversity of our thinking. But here the conflict is about the value of human life. Disagreements on topics that are not about the value of a human being can be opportunities for growth. But we cannot argue about someone's humanity and the need for equity.

Dr. Nina Balmaceda, associate Director of the Center for Reconciliation at Duke Divinity School spoke to us about conflict. She suggested the important of moving from conflict resolution to conflict transformation. The difference, she said, that distinguishes these two is that conflict transformation focuses on repairing relationships. We cannot repair a relationship if one person is seen as less than human.

It is important to know that scripture has been misused to condone slavery. Scripture is not always clear but our understanding of scripture continues to be reformed. As white Christians we have a responsibility to know this history, to struggle with the text, and to repent for the

² Miguel De La Torre, "Let Us Imagine" in *Unsettling the Word*, ed. By Steve Heinrichs, (New York: Orbis Books, 2020), 258.

history of our ancestors and offer reparations and work towards repairing relationships in a world through listening to those in the margins. We must be transformed within first.

We can still believe in God and the holiness of scripture even if we look at passages and wonder about them and disagree with them. Paul was a human. He didn't write his letters expecting them to be read, let alone be used as scripture. Know that God sent Jesus so that there was neither Jew or Greek, enslaved nor free, male nor female. God sent Jesus for everyone to live an abundant life. Thanks be to God. Amen.