



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

www.goodshepherdwi.org

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 4, 2016

“Whether Slave or Master, Worker or Boss”

(Philemon 17-20)

Rev. David K. Groth

“So if you consider me your partner, receive [Onesimus] as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it – to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ” (Philemon 17-20).

COLLECT: A merciful Lord, You did not spare Your only Son but delivered Him up for us all. Grant us courage and strength to take up the cross and follow Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

When he wrote this letter, Saint Paul was behind bars in Rome. That's where he meets a runaway slave by the name of Onesimus. Onesimus belongs to a man Paul actually knows, a believer named Philemon. Onesimus ran away from Philemon. Maybe he also stole from Philemon and others while making his getaway. In any event, Onesimus has done his time and is about to be freed.

While they are in prison together, Paul does what Paul always did, and proclaimed the Word Christ. Onesimus, runaway slave, receives that Word by faith. And along the way, Onesimus and Paul become very close friends. He's like a son to me, Paul tells Philemon, and sending him back is like "sending my very heart" (v. 12).

Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon with this letter in hand. In it, Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ. That's actually a big deal, a big request. A slave was a valuable asset and Philemon would be giving that up, a significant loss. It would also require real forgiveness and reconciliation, as well as a major change in relationship. It would no longer be the vertical relationship between a master and a slave. It would be a horizontal relationship, as equals, as brothers in Christ.

Paul tells Philemon, "If Onesimus has wronged you, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I will repay it." But then Paul adds, "Not to mention you owe me your very life." With that Paul is reminding Philemon that he, Philemon, is also Paul's spiritual child. Philemon would not know Jesus were it not for Paul.

So Paul's already asking a lot of Philemon, but there's still one more thing Philemon could do. "I would

have been glad”, Paul writes, “to keep Onesimus with me in order that he might help me . . . but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness [and generosity] might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.” In case Philemon didn’t get the hint, Paul makes it crystal clear: “Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord.” Paul’s hint is about as subtle as a flying brick. Let Onesimus come back.

And that’s pretty much it. That’s the book of Philemon, just 25 verses in all. It’s an interesting window into Paul. But you have to ask, “Why did this letter make it into the Bible in the first place? What purpose does it serve? Once we start digging, quite a few actually.

It’s a letter that teaches us by example how we interact with other Christians. It’s a letter about forgiveness and reconciliation and integrity and paying your debts and being willing to accept the consequences. It’s a letter about generosity. Be glad you’re not getting the first draft of this sermon, because in that one, I did talk about each of these topics . . . at length.

But what I really want to focus on this weekend are the dynamics between a slave and a master.

Slavery, like divorce, was a reality in the ancient world, a reality that finds its origins the hardness of the human heart. A slave in Roman times was regarded, legally, as an animated tool, a piece of property, a being without any personhood whatsoever. That devaluation of human worth . . . that contrasts starkly with the biblical truth that God created men and women in his own image. And it contrasts also with the truth that God so loved all people, including slaves, that he came down to redeem them on the cross. When Jesus looked at slaves, he didn’t see animated tools. He saw people: people he loved, people he deemed worthy of his precious blood. Over the centuries, slavery in one form or another has been virtually universal in every culture. So the Bible includes regulations for slavery, regulations that do not condone it, but were practical ways of dealing with the realities of the day.

So, in Ephesians 6 Paul writes, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. . . Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men.” Surprising right? Why would Paul say such a thing? Well, first it’s for a slave’s own welfare. If a slave was lazy, disobedient and disrespectful, he could anticipate an unhappy relationship with the master, including humiliations, beatings, or worse. Alternatively, slaves who were hardworking, honest and resourceful, usually found themselves on the master’s good side, trusted, rewarded. They could even enjoy an astonishing degree of independence and autonomy and some actually became beloved members of the extended household.

In telling Christian slaves to work hard, Paul’s concern is also for the sake of the Gospel. In Titus 2, Paul tells Christian slaves, “be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that you may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” (v.9). That is, Christian slaves, by being trustworthy and hardworking, could make the Christian faith attractive to others.

In Ephesians 6, Paul then turns his attention to slave masters. “Masters, you do the same to your slaves.” That is, treat them well “and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and he shows no favoritism.” That is, the Lord doesn’t love them any less than he loves you.

Paul is always encouraging this reciprocity in attitudes and behavior. He does it with husbands and wives. “Husbands, love your wives. Wives, respect your husbands.” Also between parents and children. Children, honor your parents. Fathers, don’t provoke your children.” Paul is always encouraging reciprocity in attitudes and behavior: between citizens and government. “If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if respect then respect.” But he also taught that kings and other leaders are given authority by God not to serve themselves but to serve their people, to protect them and enforce justice and the like.

Paul often encourages a reciprocity in attitudes and behavior and he does that also with slaves and masters. This same reciprocity Paul is encouraging between slaves and their masters should also exist between employees and their bosses.

Say you're a young man just out of high school. You landed a job with a construction firm, and you'll be working with the masons, the bricklayers. But you're not going to get to lay bricks right away. Not at all. You won't get to do that until you've earned your stripes. For now, you're going to mix and haul mortar, and you're going to haul brick, and you're going to have to answer to just about anyone who calls out your name. And they won't put up with any lip from you. In many ways, you're not unlike a slave. Now Paul would say, be the best darn brick hauler and mortar mixer you can possibly be. Serve the brick layers as if you were serving Jesus. If you do this, you'll be serving others (always a good thing to do), but at the same time it's for your own welfare. You'll gain the respect and appreciation of those guys. They'll treat you well, and will eventually give you additional responsibilities and pay and trust. But remember, there's also another motive Paul is aiming at. It reflects well on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Christians who do shoddy work and are lazy and miserable to work with, A) they're not going to thrive as a worker, and B) they're not going to win any souls for Christ.

Now, if you're a Christian boss or manager, you're relationship with your employees is not altogether unlike a master's relationship with slaves. As boss, within limits, you get to tell them what to do, how to do it, when and where. Now there are lots of bosses who let that to their heads and they become little tyrants, little dictators, if only in their own little shop. But if you're a boss, Paul would remind you, be very careful about how you treat those who serve you, because they too were made in God's own image, and he loves them. Be kind and fair and respectful and thank them when they do well. Don't threaten them. Don't abuse them. Treat them with dignity, quote, "because you know that he

who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and he shows no favoritism.” That is, everybody is accountable to someone. And just as your employees are accountable to you, you are accountable to Almighty God in heaven, who, by the way, has a keen interest in the welfare of the lowly, the humble, the poor, the young and the old (some of whom are your employees), while also having a keen interest in and ready impatience for the rich and the powerful who abuse their position and authority. As a boss, the temptations are great to be a jerk. C.S. Lewis wrote, “I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be masters” (From “Equality”, Present Concerns). Similarly, it’s an enormous responsibility God gives to some to be bosses and managers.

Whatever your vocations, don’t be a jerk. Rather, do it with all your heart in service of your neighbor and to the glory of God.

Finally, you and I have failed in our callings as employees, or employers, in our vocations as parents and as children, as neighbors, friends, citizens. We have sinned, and Jesus said, “Anyone who sins is a slave to sin.” Sin owns us lock, stock and barrel, but we can’t run away from that cruel master. Thanks be to God that we have a Savior who, in order to save us, became a slave for us.

Paul wrote, “Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant (the word there is *doulos*, and that can be “servant” or “slave”), “taking the form of a *doulos*, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2).

Those who have authority often do just about anything to keep their authority, but here, the Son of God gives up his power and authority for us. He becomes like a slave. Instead of changing the law of the land to help him keep his grip on power, Jesus subjected himself to the Law. God became a slave for us who wanted to become like God. Adam and Eve wanted to be like God, right? All their

descendents including you and me also want to be like God, having all power and wealth and knowledge and so on. And somehow we got it into our heads that what it means to be God is that you never have to serve anyone.

But the true God became a *doulos*, a servant/a slave. For us who want to be served, Christ came to serve, by shedding his blood for us. For us who want to be invincible, God became frail, weak, vulnerable. For us who want to be the Master, the BossMan, the Head Honcho, God made himself nothing. For us who have a strong distaste for dirty work, Jesus got down on the floor and washed dirty feet. For us who want to be immortal God, God died. For us who want immeasurable wealth, God became poor. For us that want glory and attention like God, God became humble and ignoreable. For us who never want to have to serve anyone, God became our Suffering Servant. Like a slave he was bound. Like a slave he was whipped and beaten. Like a slave he was mocked and belittled and spat on. Like a runaway slave he was executed. Instead of ruthlessly crushing his opponents, “he was crushed for our iniquities” (Is. 53:5).

On the cross, Jesus became a slave to your sin so that you and I could be free. Free from sin. Free from death. And free from the power of the devil.

Now, this side of the cross, your attitude, whether the mortar mixer or bricklayer . . . your attitude, whether employee or boss . . . your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, to the benefit of your neighbors and to the glory of God. Amen.

