

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia
September 4, 2016
Pentecost XVI

Philemon 1-21

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love-- and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 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. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

My maternal grandfather was from Canajoharie, NY...a yankee. His people had emigrated from Germany in the late 1600s.

My maternal grandmother was a southerner, from North Carolina. My father's family was also southern, from Virginia and North Carolina.

In the Civil War, my maternal grandfather's people, fought with the Union. The others sided with the Confederacy. They were all Christian ...though they were shooting at each other.

Recently, my wife Katherine and I decided to take a drive out in the countryside...east along the James River...and some of the places we visited reminded me of my own family history.

You see, we ended up at Malvern Hill. This was the site of an extremely bloody battle in the Seven Days Battle around Richmond in 1862. The Union had the high ground with the river at their back. And up the hill charged the Confederates, over and over again. They sustained tremendous casualties and did not take the position.

One of my southern uncles¹, James Williamson Millner, was at that battle...as part of the 38th Virginia Infantry...and he was wounded there. He survived the war, moved to North Carolina, and had 9 children. His unit in the Civil War was also at Manassas, Sharpsburg and Gettysburg.

Meanwhile, my northern relations were also at Manassas, Gettysburg and a number of other places. My Union uncle John Ardnt, was part of the Iron Brigade, made up of volunteer infantry regiments from Wisconsin and Indiana.

John Ardnt was a Major and also a medic. I have a letter from him, written to his family, toward the end of the war when he was stationed in Tennessee. The letter was meant to be circulated amongst his relatives so that everyone could know where he had been and what he had been doing. It lists every battle he'd been in with the Iron Brigade, the number of casualties each time, and in some instances, mentions names of the dead.

For instance, about Gettysburg he wrote: "Our available force on this occasion was 302. Of this number, 37 were killed, 144 were wounded and 52 made prisoners: - Our entire loss here occurred on the 1st day and very early in the battle. It was on this field as you are aware that Lieutenant W. B. Winegar fell: (37 killed) All within the space of two hours..."

I have gone to the National Cemetery at Gettysburg and found Lieutenant Winegar's grave. It was a powerful moment.

Also powerful are my uncle's words about war which he wrote from Tennessee where he was stationed after Gettysburg. "But above all, and beyond all and dearer and more precious than all else, where are the once happy and contented people fled who lived and breathed and had their being here? Where are the rosy cheeked cherubs and blue-eyed maidens gone? Where are the gallant young men? Alas they are sleeping in their graves at Shiloh, at Fort Donnelson, at Corinth, on yonder battle field not one mile distant, and on still other fields of so called glory, more remote: - the women, old and young have died of grief or are broken hearted, the children are orphans: Poor little things. I pity them from my heart as I look upon them - black and white, for they seem to have shared a common fate, and look like dying a common destiny: - In many cases you will find two or three white children

¹ Great, great uncle, of our course!

whose parents are dead, left to the mercies and care of their slaves; and again you will find a number of negro children whose parents are also dead nestled in the bosom of some white families who by a miracle were spared from the vandalism of war. Truly may it be said that the South are reaping a most fearful retribution for the sin of cession (sic) and rebellion. -No greater scourge can ever visit a country than war, and although there seems to be no arbiter short of the sword, yet it seems a pity that there is not.”²

Why am I thinking about and sharing all this family history? Well, I was set off on this journey by our epistle for today, Paul’s Letter to Philemon. It is Paul’s shortest letter...335 words in the Greek. The whole thing was read this morning.

It was written to a person not to a church community as were his other letters and there are a variety of opinions on how to interpret this letter. However, the traditional interpretation involves slavery. ...hence my mental connections...because the Civil War...at its heart...was about slavery.

In the traditional interpretation, Paul is under arrest...either in prison or under house arrest. And he meets Onesimus, who is a run away slave...and converts him. Paul has “come to regard him as a child...and wants him to continue in his service. He has decided, however to send him back to his master, Philemon, so as to obtain Philemon’s approval and possibly Onesimus’ freedom. Paul’s problem is that Onesimus...may have also wronged his master or stolen from him, so that his requests for Onesimus’s continued stay and possible emancipation are directed to a master who was more likely to be angry than amenable.”³

So with the traditional interpretation, as I said, the letter puts the whole question of slavery front and center. And as one scholar has noted, “Americans used religion to attack or defend slavery ... three major Protestant denominations churches – Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians – divided over slavery. Southern ministers used slaveholding by Old Testament patriarchs and leaders (such as Abraham, Jacob, and Job) to justify slavery and then used New Testament pronouncements and stories – such as Paul’s Letter to Philemon – to justify slavery. However, abolitionists stressed how slavery produced immorality, especially sexual immorality...to argue that slavery itself was sinful.”⁴ Everybody was using

² <http://bmillner2.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2014-12-04T15:37:00-08:00&max-results=7>

³ The Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV, copyright 1993. Page 2247.

⁴ Religion and Slavery in Antebellum America by Barbara A. McGraw, copyright 2016. Summary from: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118528631.ch16/summary>

scripture, but it seems that their opinions were formed much more by personal circumstances and geography than by anything else.

Now I would argue that Paul is, given his context and time, was incredibly progressive. I don't apply texts woodenly or look upon them outside of the contexts which gave them birth. Most importantly, I try to see the movement of the text, how the Spirit is moving in the text, and move the same way in my own day.⁵ The movement of the Spirit, as best I can discern, seems to move always in the direction of justice and freedom and liberation. That approach, by the way, is part of what sets the Episcopal Church apart from Christian fundamentalism.

So what I hear is Paul telling a slaveholder that he could command him to release Onesimus, but he'd rather appeal to him in love. Paul wants Philemon's good deed to be voluntary. And Paul tells Philemon that in reality, since Onesimus and Philemon are both Christians, Onesimus is a slave no longer, but a beloved brother. Paul says, "Welcome him as you would welcome me". So the whole dynamic has changed in an incredibly progressive direction given the context and times.

But I know that my...and your...ability for self-delusion is great. I know the truth is hard to come by. We are formed by where we are, who are people are, and self interests. My relatives were shooting at each other during the Civil War. Years later, they were marrying each other. It is a shame they couldn't have skipped the slaughter and gone straight to the love.

And that said, the Christian faith is not an easy one to live out. So many things we think we know are true, aren't. So many things we think aren't true, are. It is tough to break through our own prejudices and preconceptions. It is hard to be open to the Spirit of truth and justice.

In the gospel this morning Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." To get to the truth we have to be willing to let it all go, to be stripped bare. And that is the good news...dare to let go of it all...and find the truth. Die to sin and rise to true life. This is our calling. It is an awesome thing. And it is...if we can trust it...if we can let go...good news. Amen.

⁵ I learned the idea of "dynamic equivalence" from a book entitled "Liberation Preaching" by Catherine and Justo Gonzalez.

