

Sermon Philemon 16th S of Pent SC

Sermon: 16th Sunday after Pentecost – Disability Awareness Sunday

Text: Philemon (v. 7)

Theme: How to refresh the hearts of the disabled

Goal: To raise awareness of what we can do as Christians to help people who have any kind of disability

Dear Friends,

Introduction: In short, this letter to Philemon is a private letter from the Apostle Paul to his friend Philemon, pleading him to accept Onesimus, his runaway slave, back, not as a slave anymore, but as a fellow Christian, because Onesimus had been converted to Christ through the witness of Paul.

Many other names are mentioned in this short letter; but there are three main characters: Philemon, Onesimus and Paul. We will go through these three men and see what we can learn from them about how to manage our conflicts and how to help each other, and also the disabled people.

A disabled person is not just someone in a wheel chair, or a blind person guided by a dog. If we look honestly inside us, we will notice that each of us has some kind of disability, not only physical, but maybe emotional and psychological. And when we acknowledge this, it helps to understand other kinds of disability as well and try to put ourselves in someone's shoes, not ignoring those with special needs, but showing them our love in Christ.

I – Philemon

Philemon was a rich man living in the city of Colosse (now part of Turkey). He had been converted to the Christian faith, he was hosting a church in his house, and was well known for his good witness and for his charity. The text we highlighted could have been

a good inscription on Philemon's grave stone: "Your love had given me great joy and encouragement, because, you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints."

On the other hand, Philemon was a slave owner. It seems that most of the members of the church in Colosse were from pagan background. And, as part of their culture, slave owners had to be very strict with their slaves. They had the right even to kill a slave who did something wrong; and the owner wouldn't suffer any charge against him; because a slave was his property, like a cow or a horse.

II – Onesimus

Totally opposite was the situation of Onesimus. As a slave, he was among the most destitute people of his time. He didn't have any rights; he had to do whatever his owner commanded; and he could be punished severely for every mistake he committed, even paying with his own life.

We don't know what really happened; but it seems from this letter that Onesimus had stolen something from his master and ran away. Now he was really an outcast and he deserved capital punishment.

But, by God's strange but wise ways, Onesimus met the Apostle Paul, who was in prison in Rome at that time due to his faith. And he became a Christian through the witness of Paul. He began to serve Paul and to help him while in prison. But something was bothering him: He was now a Christian, and his former boss was also a Christian. He had to go back and to reconcile with Philemon, as it is due to honest Christians. But if he goes back on his own, he could be killed by his master as soon as he enters his property.

Now, Paul enters this story:

III – Paul

Paul was an old man when this happened, and he was suffering from vision impairment. He was also in prison due to his witness of Jesus Christ. We can say that Paul was a disabled person: almost blind, suffering the effects of his old age, and without freedom to come and go like a normal person. Onesimus was helping him as much as he could and Paul would love to keep Onesimus with him. But Paul recognized that it was time for Onesimus to go back to his boss, to ask for forgiveness and to reconcile with him as fellow Christian. Then Paul wrote this letter, a very diplomatic letter, appealing Philemon “on the basis of love”, and because Philemon had received the forgiveness and love of Christ, he should forgive and receive Onesimus back as he was Paul’s heart itself; not as a slave anymore, but as a fellow brother in the Christian faith. And Paul asked him to do it “spontaneous and not forced” by Paul’s pleading. More: Paul sent someone with Onesimus to deliver the letter to Philemon, a man called Tychicus – like an advocate.

Conclusion: We can find most of the Christian principles we have in this letter about dealing with others, also with disable people:

- a) We were accepted by God through faith in Christ, in spite of our sins and bad behaviors; we have God’s love and we have to accept others!
- b) God wants us to share not only our faith with others, but also His love with all, refreshing the hearts of the others by our attitude and behavior.
- c) The bigger the offence, the bigger the forgiveness. It was not easy for Philemon to forgive and to accept Onesimus back; he had all the pressure of his society and his culture behind him, telling him to do just the opposite. But, for the sake of Christ, and for the sake of his friendship with Paul, he did it.

Luther wrote about this letter: *This epistle gives us a masterful and tender illustration of Christian love. He, Paul, acts exactly as if he were himself Onesimus, who had done wrong... What Christ had done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does also for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his rights and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his wrath and rights, and receive us into favor for the sake of Christ, who so earnestly advocates our case and so heartily takes our part. For we are all his Onesimus if we believe.*

(CSSB, p. 1870).

Onesimus means “useful”. Paul makes a play of words when he wrote to Philemon about Onesimus: “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.” His faith had transform him in a useful person, matching his behavior with his name.

We are also useful people when we submit to Christ’s love. More: We are like “little Christs” shinning Christ’s light in the world surrounded by darkness and needs. No one can say that he/she is useless and that he/she cannot do anything; it doesn’t matter even if he/she is a disabled person. God has a purpose for each of us in this word. We cannot just wait for the others, but we have to accept the challenges that God put in front of us. - We will watch a little video (Nick Vujisic’s story) at the end of the service which is a strong encouragement about faith and how to overcome our own limitations; it speaks by itself. The Paralympics begin this week in Rio. It’s good to watch it to stop complaining about ourselves and to fight with Gods strength to face our challenges and to be hand in hand with those disabled. Amen.

Pastor Carlos Walter Winterle, cape Town, 03 September 2016