

Personal Letter

We rarely get to hear an entire letter from St. Paul. Usually his letters are closely argued treatises that require careful attention, so we only hear small sections at a time. St. Peter famously complained that Paul's letters are often hard to understand. We aren't the only ones who struggle with them.

The letter we just heard is short enough to read in its entirety in a church setting. It's a personal letter to someone named Philemon. We don't know who he was, but he must have been wealthy. He had a house big enough for believers to meet in, and he had slaves. One of them was Onesimus, who ran away, possibly taking money or property with him. We'll get to that in a moment.

Paul's letters always had a point. He never commented on the weather or how the crops were doing, as we might. This letter begins with a long section praising Philemon and reminding him how much Paul prays for him and has received from him. One gets the impression that Paul is setting him up for a big request. Sure enough, Paul soon switches gears and says that he could *command* Philemon but instead will *appeal* to him regarding Onesimus, whom Paul has converted to Christianity while in prison.

There's a clever play on words here; Onesimus means "useful." By running away he became "useless," but he has been "useful" to Paul and can be "useful" to Philemon once again. Rather than keep Onesimus around, Paul is sending him back to Philemon and encourages reconciliation between the two. Paul urges his case in the strongest terms. There's a clear implication that Philemon should free this slave. Paul also offers to repay anything that may be owed to Philemon, indicating that Onesimus may have stolen money.

Earlier I said that we heard the entire letter, but that's not quite right. The reading stopped before the last few verses in which Paul implies he's going to visit Philemon. Is that further pressure on him? Paul seems to have mastered passive-aggressive behavior.

Why do we still read this personal letter? It does tell us a lot about Paul and early church life, but it also tells us something about our own faith. Belief in Jesus Christ transforms lives. We know that was true of Paul, and here it becomes true for a runaway slave who has become a believer. Onesimus repented and wanted to be reconciled to his master. A modern equivalent might be the 8th and 9th steps of the twelve-step recovery from addiction – where one makes a list of all the people who have been harmed while under the influence and makes amends whenever possible.

So we see that faith also transforms relationships. Philemon is encouraged to receive Onesimus back as a brother, a sibling not a slave, in Jesus Christ. Paul made that transformation even clearer in his letter to the church in Galatia, where he said that there is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). It was a revolutionary message then and is still is today. Many Christians fail to live up to it. I'm reminded once again of what St. Benedict says in his *Rule* for living together: "Your way of acting should be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else" (RB 4:20-21).

And so this personal letter of St. Paul, like all of his letters, challenges us. There's nothing hard to understand about being transformed by faith in Jesus Christ and treating all people with dignity. What's hard is to live it out. I'll bet it was hard for Philemon, too. The fact that the letter was kept and read in churches seems to indicate that Philemon did indeed do what Paul asked. Can we do any less?

[Pentecost 13: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33.]