

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, September 4, 2016)

Text:

Please note: Our text this week, Philemon 1-21, was delivered as a dramatic sketch during our service of worship. Below is the New Revised Standard Version.

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. One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: “A New Way of Seeing”

As I discovered by reading a number of commentators about the text before us today, many preachers avoid this letter from Paul to his dear friend and co-worker Philemon, when it comes up in the lectionary. But, as you know, that kind of avoidance just tends to intrigue me more! What is it about this very short epistle – a mere 25 verses in all – that confounds and/or puts off so many?

Well, of course, there’s the fact that it’s written by Paul – a figure that for many in the progressive Christian movement of which we are a part has become something like that self same thorn in the flesh he describes in his second letter to the Corinthians as “the messenger of Satan to buffet me.”

For who else, of all our Greek testament writers could come across more profoundly human, his faults and foibles so nakedly displayed, than Paul? Who else condemns, frustrates and prods at the pains and peccadilloes of those trying to live the Christian life than Paul? And, finally, who else is so firmly rooted in his culture and his time as he who commands that women not cut their hair and stay silent in the churches? Is it any wonder that some people find it easier to stick with the gospel

accounts of Jesus' life and ministry than spend too much time with Paul, even though 13 of the 27 books in the New Testament are attributed to Paul and the people whom he influenced?

I will freely admit to counting myself in that group of people as I grew up in a decidedly more conservative denomination than the United Church of Christ. Often it seemed that the words attributed to Paul were used to keep people down and to divide churches and Christians rather than uphold or encourage them. How many times as a teenager did I pour over his letters and wonder if I had any possible hope of being the person God wanted me to be if it meant obeying the rules and following the precepts as he presented them and were interpreted to me.

But growth and understanding are wonderful things and peering deeper into Paul's writings such as the letter we have to Philemon today can grant us great insight and help for our own daily modern living as we approach it with all the tools granted to us today from our loving, merciful God who is absolutely still speaking and wants us to gain understanding from these holy words. Indeed, contained in this very letter are words that can liberate our hearts and minds, freeing us to absorb and use what we may find there for ourselves. And what better time than Labor Day weekend to discover these liberating truths that can WORK for us throughout our lives?

Let's begin with a little bit of history provided to us from our excellent Seasons of the Spirit curriculum which we will again be using as we start up our LEAP of Faith Bible Study sessions this coming Wednesday (like how I got that plug in there?). We typically meet 5:30 to 6:30 pm on the first and last Wednesdays of each month.

As Seasons tells us, this, "letter to Philemon is a request to a Christian who hosts a church in his home. Philemon was an influential leader in the community and, as was common at that time, a slave owner... The issue at hand is that Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus has become a Christian, and Paul has become his spiritual parent. This "private" letter was delivered to Philemon by Onesimus, but addressed to the whole church...[moving] the treatment of Onesimus from the private realm to the public life of the Christian realm, [and] highlighting the importance of justice in relationships within the Body of Christ."

So already we have something we, as Americans, can relate to – the issue of slavery that hangs over our country like a dark cloud from our past and the ramifications of such unjust treatment of God's children on all of us who live on this land. As we know from the current "Black Lives Matter" movement along with the history of the fight for civil rights in this country, the consequences of slavery continue to resound long and loud and have continued to affect the lives of all who call this country home.

Part of what struck me so profoundly in reading our text from today is how Paul is promoting the liberation of one bound by slavery in a time when such a thing would have not even been considered. Perhaps as unlikely as a southern plantation owner in the mid-1800's sending a letter to a friend up north asking him to offer hospitality and freedom to one of his own slaves.

And what language does Paul use to make this request? In the New Revised Standard Version he writes, "I ... appeal to you on the basis of love." The basis of love. Perhaps Paul, who, as he continues, describes himself as "an old man" is wakening to the powerful truth that it often takes a lifetime to learn, "love is truly all there is." What else but the power of Christ in his heart and the knowledge of God's overarching love in every thing, person and situation could account for such a one as Paul pleading with Philemon to see Onesimus "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."

This is transformation thinking. This is seeing the person God sees in another despite their situation in life and despite what they've done before. This is seeing each person as God sees us – whole, free and beloved.

As our Seasons of the Spirit comments, "Behind the identity given to us by society lies our true identity in relationship with God and Christ. Living as Christ's own enables us to forge relationships of love and respect with one another."

Seeing not only others this way but ourselves as God's beloved children as well, we are able to change the patterns of history. Living into and full accepting the constantly available and replenishing love of God, we change our own thinking and the thinking of those around us, leading us ever closer to the kin-dom God envisions for all of God's creation.

Where can we make a difference in the world today? Where can we make a difference right where we live? I think our focus on missions and on the daily changes we can make in our own environments go a long way to bringing about the love and the light God wants to shine on all of creation. Making adjustments to the way you move and live in the world and the way you relate to each person who comes across your path has more of a profound impact than you may perhaps realize.

In her excellent commentary on this text as it relates to this Labor Day weekend called "Searching Our Hearts and Our Cultural Values," Dr. Edith (Edie) Rasell, writes, "On this Labor Sunday, let us examine our economy and our workplaces through the lens of our faith. We know that God's will is for each of us to live a life of wholeness. God's abundance is to be shared so all people live in the fullness of life. This means workers must be paid a living wage and be treated with dignity. All workers. No exceptions.

"But," she goes on to say, "in our economy and in our culture, some workers are much more valuable than others and some have very little value. We fail to look at each person and see a child of God endowed with infinite value. Instead we see the dropout, the formerly incarcerated person, the immigrant, the one who didn't go to college, the person with a disability, the older and slowing-down person, the one who doesn't speak like me, or look like me, or act like me. [And] the abuse and exploitation of these "others" impacts all of us, whether we choose to see it or not."

How often have I been brought up out of my life of privilege and blessing to realize that others are being affected by how I act, what I spend my money on and how I treat those that are at work around me and with me. Opening myself to the uncomfortable truths of what I may need to change becomes possible when I affirm God's love is for each and every one of us and that God will see each of us through whatever circumstance we find ourselves in on this earthly plane if we but listen and follow God's calling and God's nudging.

Perhaps, like Paul, we can see the child of God in each person, and work to help other's see each other this way as well.

"We live in a land flowing with milk and honey," Dr. Rasell writes. "God's abundance has been lavished on us to be shared among all God's people. But we know that not everyone is living the abundant life that is God's vision for each of us. Let us search our hearts, examine our actions, and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We cannot help all our neighbors but we can help some of them. Let us stand with those on the margins and together with God, create a world that more closely matches God's vision."

Amen!