

Texts: Philemon 1:1–21 and Luke 14:25–33

Sermon Title: *No Longer a Slave: The Cost of Receiving a Brother*

*The Cross Shaped Letter*

## Setting

Luke's audience is diaspora Judeans after the Jewish-Roman war, which ended in about 70 AD, with the destruction of the temple and wholesale slaughter of diaspora Judeans throughout the Greco-Roman world. Luke's audience was shaken to its core.

Thousands of young men had been recruited to the armies of generals already – Roman, Judeans, Greeks. Jesus' is recruiting, but his army is radically different. Jesus' 'army' is committed to forging the kind of peace delivered in the kingdom of God ... not the kind of peace enforced in the Kingdom of Caesar or even the kingdom of the Maccabees. Following Jesus requires a reorienting of lives ... a reorienting of what seems like natural affections and natural paths of behaviour. Following Jesus to the Kingdom of God requires our intention ... BUT it may not feel NATURAL.

The Letter of Paul to Philemon outlines the intention that we are asked to have become our NATURE, because it is our true nature. But, yes, we do get sidetracked, don't we?

## Introduction: The Letter You Didn't Expect

The letter from Paul to Philemon is the voice of a person who is respected and loved to a person who has been wronged.

How have we been wronged? What is our 'go to' wound? My 'go to wound' is my dad leaving. It's an old, old story and I share it all the time. It's my go-to wound. Do you have one of those ... that wound that is under every part of you. Or, maybe you're lucky enough not to have a 'go-to'. But what might be your wound of this day? Somebody hurt you? Somebody stole from you? Somebody cheated you? Somebody lied to you? We all have a wound, sometimes old, sometimes new. Sadly, wounds are not hard to come by.

Who is our 'beloved one'... our Paul. Who is that person in our lives? Who is likely the one knows us well enough to make that ask? Who is that person that can say to us, "I know you and I know how you feel, I know your pain and I'm asking you to set that down for the sake of your soul."

If you can't hear that person's voice right now, don't worry, just keep that in your mind and God will bring you the light in these days that are coming.

This letter to Philemon is a parable for Jesus' instructions, recounted by Luke's Gospel, for us to follow Jesus; for us to become disciples. The message is profoundly and simply "Leave it all behind".

This letter to Philemon is short. Tucked away near the back of our Bible. Just one chapter long. But it offers a world-changing question: **How can we follow Christ?**

**Today, I ask, then, in three scenes, “When Christ calls us to follow what does scripture ask us to do?”**

### **Scene 1 Entitled: Onesimus shows The Courage to Return**

Onesimus had run. And he was afraid. Maybe he stole something. Maybe he just fled the injustice of slavery. We don't know.

But now... he's walking back. Carrying not chains, but a letter. A cross-shaped letter that reminds us that we must face the pain and when we face the pain we are not alone.

In the letter, Paul says to Philemon, “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains...” (Philemon 10) “I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.” (v. 12)

Onesimus, for his part, dares to return. This is probably a larger ‘return’ than the story outlines. He didn't just return, but he returned NOT trusting in the law, but trusting in grace. Whatever made him run in the first place, was very likely big and scary. Whatever it was, he had run away and was disgraced. Now he must return to face whatever his master offered. This was a turning point for Onesimus. Onesimus returned and owned his fear, or shame, or anger; accepting what came to him, having picked up his cross and followed Jesus to become reconciled.

*“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” —Luke 14.27*

From poet Garnaas-Holmes called

#### **THE CROSS**

It doesn't mean you belong.

It means you're willing to die.

**Think not of what you must accomplish**

**but what you will surrender;**

and by that cross great things may be accomplished.

**When Christ calls us to follow what does scripture ask us to do?**

**We must face the past, face the pain and carry our cross toward reconciliation, in faith**

### **Scene 2 Entitled: Philemon – The Humility to Forgive**

Imagine opening your front door to find a man standing there—a person you know, a person who hurt you, betrayed your trust, perhaps stole from you, perhaps tricked you.. ex-husband, failed parent, a bad boss... while I was writing this I came up with an astounding number of people who still resided in my ‘unforgiven’ category. And now they're back... all of them ... offering you a letter from someone you love and respect.

This means they know your sacred person and are loved by your sacred person. Your sacred person isn't just yours anymore.

Can you hear that voice of your sacred person? For me it's two women, now passed. My mom asking me to stop holding grudges, “Susan, things are NOT always black and white”, she says to me. Or my dear friend Sharon, “I know your style” she would say to me” ... and she did. She could call me on any of my righteous indignations.

Being offended can feel like such a helpful response, can't it? But, is it Jesus' response? Not according to Paul. Paul is asking us to forgive. To receive, not a servant, not a criminal, not an 'offender', but a **brother**.

What does it cost to treat someone not as they were, or how they have behaved, but as Christ sees them?

Philemon is being asked to give up **everything**—not money, but **social order, personal pride**, oooh yes ... **the right to be angry**, the right to hold a grudge! Philemon is being asked to give up more than a servant. He's being asked to surrender his social power, his pride, maybe even his sense of justice. "But that's not fair!" he says. Philemon is the one holding, having been given, the hammer of judgment. Can he release his legal right to judgement and embrace Onesimus as a brother, like Christ? Can Philemon, face the change in the world of master and slave, power and privilege?

🎵 **Song:** Bob Dylan said ... *"The Times They Are A-Changin'" – Bob Dylan (1964)...* *"Your old road is rapidly aging..."*

The gospel changes everything.

"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost?" (Luke 14:28)  
"Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples." (Luke 14:33)

Judgement ... who of us is a 'judger'? Do we judge and punish? Or can we act like Christ to forgive and embrace? This is the radical reversal of the gospel. When we have the power to judge and punish we are reminded that we, too are recipients of grace and being reminded that we have been embraced can we embrace others, even when we hold the right to condemn?

The gospel isn't just about personal salvation. It's about reconciliation and that reconciliation costs us something. If we touch that 'go to wound' maybe we can even feel that cost in our gut. Notice here, by the way, that the instruction is NOT 'condone', it's FORGIVE. Forgive for the good of our own soul.

**When Christ calls us to follow what does scripture ask us to do?**

**We must lay down our pride and our pain, recognize our privilege and receive even those who have hurt us—as Christ receives us for the sake of reconciliation.**

### **Scene 3: Entitled Paul – The Love to Stand in the Gap**

Paul writes from prison. He could command Philemon, but he doesn't. He pleads, and he offers to **pay the debt** himself. "If he owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, will repay it." (vv. 18–19). He's old and he's imprisoned; bound for Christ, and still giving everything. This action of Paul's could be interpreted through the lens of atonement theology which says, "Jesus died to appease God for our sins", but it doesn't have to be. The cross-shaped letter from Paul to Philemon does not speak atonement but it speaks of reconciliation in action. No, we're never too old or too poor or too overwhelmed that we can't offer to stand in that gap between the people in our world.

Paul doesn't benefit from this—he's risking his credibility and spending his honour capital. He uses his own resources, reputation, and authority to remove barriers and open the possibility for Philemon to see Onesimus not as property or debtor but as brother. Paul is doing what Christ did: becoming a bridge... laying himself down between two estranged people; working toward reconciliation.

Paul offers to pay the honour debt caused by Onesimus. Remember, honour and shame are actual currency for Paul and Philemon.

Story: A long time ago, I worked in the word processing arena when they were first invented. It was a great time of innovation and change. Along with all this excitement, there were also a number of minefield like dangers. We were placing word processors in St. Joseph's Hospital medical records. What a great innovation for people who prepared all the reports of doctors for medical procedures.

However, not all of the people in the department embraced the technology. There was one lady who was having difficulty and worried about keeping her job with this new technology. We were there to train people. My colleague said to this lady, in the hope of helping her relax, that if she were younger, this probably wouldn't be so hard. SHE DID NOT take that well.... Off to HR with an 'age discrimination' complaint against our company. OHHHHH. The owner of our company, Mr. Haley, stood firmly with my colleague, taking the heat from HR. He could have thrown her to the wolves and fired her for her error, but he chose reconciliation in a Paul-like way. Dear Mr. Haley. Building a bridge.

Let's look and **notice** where there is a gap between foes and go stand in it offering equal love to each one. Use your personal honour to absorb the dishonour of 'the offended' while in solidarity with the offender. So, the next time you are ticked with someone, and your dear, respected friend says to you, "Maybe they were just having a bad day". Instead of "Why can't you be on my side?" (I've been right here) Give God a chance and let reconciliation happen. Set down 'being offended' or 'being self-righteous' in the name of Christ's desire for us... for reconciliation.

Be an example of how to treat an offender with grace and respect, demonstrating that it can be done. Reframe a relationship of people so that it is no longer a relationship with a person seen as a problem or a project, but a relationship of two humans, both created in the image of God, both deserving of love and belonging.

**When Christ calls us to follow, what does scripture ask us to do?**

**We are asked to stand in the gap between foes. We must offer our comfort, our name, our influence—for the sake of reconciliation.**

### **Conclusion: What the Cross Requires**

Jesus said in Luke 14:

"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (v. 27)

"Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples." (v. 33)

The letter to Philemon is not just a request.

It is a **living illustration** of that cross-bearing love:

- Onesimus risks his life to return.
- Philemon risks his pride and his honour to forgive.
- Paul risks his name to reconcile.

This is what the gospel asks of us: Not just to believe in Christ— But to **become like Jesus in the name of Christ** in how we love, forgive, and pay the price for peace.

## **Final Call and Response**

I will Ask a question and, if you are comfortable, I ask that you respond with one line, as written in the Sermon space of your Order of Service.

When Christ calls us to follow, what must we do?

### **People (response):**

- We give up the assuredness of 'how it is'
- We give up the hatred and sadness of holding a grudge,
- We receive one another as brothers and sisters.
- We carry the cross of reconciliation.
- We forgive as we've been forgiven.
- We follow—whatever the cost.

Because this price buys us the most amazing thing... a life of love and light that grows and creates more love and light of God through Jesus Christ.

### **Closing Prayer:**

We confess that the idea of discipleship without cost is a tempting choice

So Help us understand that what is called cost is really an opportunity to invest in true freedom

Help us face our past like Onesimus,

Help us forgive like Philemon,

Help us stand in the space between unsettled people like Paul.

Help us be disciples who understand the value of the effort to face, forgive and stand firm.

Amen