

Pentecost 16C (9/4/2016)

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 1

**Philemon 1-21**

Luke 14:25-33

*There's the family we're given, and there's the family we choose. We are not defined primarily by our lineage or our station in life, but by our place in the family of Christ. To be his kindred is a singular privilege and calling. God entrusts us into each other's care regardless of our origins or differences, and we turn toward each other with sacrificial love.*

There's the family we're given, and there's the family we choose. We're all born into a particular lineage with distinct biological relations. Some of us live with those family members during the first stage of our lives, and some of us find our way into other families at an early age. Some of us have positive experiences with our families of origin, and some of us don't. And, most of us eventually leave our first families to forge new relationships. There's the family we're given, and there's the family we choose. I first heard this phrase in reference to close friendships in adulthood. A young woman who had a strained relationship with her family of origin found comfort in a circle of friends who understood her and loved her without reservation. That's the family we choose, the people who exemplify the true meaning of family, even if our blood relations fall short.

"Perhaps this is the reason [Onesimus] was separated from you for a while," the Apostle Paul writes to Philemon, "so that you may have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother...." It's not every Sunday that we read nearly an entire book of the Bible in worship, but that's just what we did today. Only the last four verses of Paul's letter to Philemon are missing from our

second reading today. And, while we might at first be inclined to dismiss this little-known book tucked away near the end of the Bible, it turns out that it's a scriptural gem. Philemon is much more than an archaic text concerned with some small personal matter of significance only to Paul. Rather, **it's a vivid example of the love of Christ in practice, an appeal to all of us to reconsider how we relate to the family we're given and the family we choose.**

If Paul's letter to Philemon is unfamiliar to you, here's an introduction.

[Excerpt from Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord*, p.454]

A number of questions about the background of the letter remain unanswered. For instance, it's uncertain why Onesimus, Philemon's slave, left his master's household in the first place, how he came into contact with Paul in prison, and what, if any, debt he owes to Philemon. Yet, in spite of the mystery surrounding the events leading up to Paul's writing of the letter, one fact is clear: **a slave held little status in the first-century household, and accordingly, his master held no responsibility to treat him otherwise.** In the case that Onesimus disappeared without permission, Philemon would retain the right to administer a strict punishment upon his return. The terms of slavery, therefore, were set. These were simply the circumstances of the family Philemon and Onesimus were given.

But there's the family we're given, and there's the family we choose. "Perhaps this is the reason [Onesimus] was separated from you for a while, so that you may have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother...." As a result of his encounter with Paul, Onesimus has come to embrace the gospel. And, his entry into the community of faith is life-changing. **Belonging in**

**Christ has transformed Onesimus' identity. He is no longer valuable only by virtue of his usefulness to his master, but instead has become a brother in faith, cherished among the kindred of Christ – a family that includes Paul, Philemon, and all the others in Philemon's house church who would hear the letter read aloud. In other words, this is the family that Onesimus has chosen.**

Or, maybe it's more accurate to say that **this is the family that has chosen him**. Since Paul has taken Onesimus under his wing, he entrusts him into Philemon's care as he would his own child, his "own heart." In fact, the relationship between Paul and Onesimus is such that Paul expects Philemon to welcome Onesimus back into his household as he would welcome Paul himself. He appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother," that is, to *choose him as family*. Such a radical reorientation of relationships may even require that Philemon release Onesimus from slavery altogether.

This is a tall order. Powerful men in antiquity were expected to uphold the status quo, and granting Paul's request would certainly cause Philemon to lose face among his social equals.<sup>1</sup> But Paul has every reason to place his trust in Philemon. After all, Philemon has also been gripped by the gospel, and he has already demonstrated faithfulness to Christ and Christlike love for others, the two pillars of discipleship. There is no reason to believe that he will not be moved by the conviction undergirding Paul's appeal, a conviction that Paul puts into words in another letter: that **there is no longer Jew or Gentile, there is no longer slave or**

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<sup>1</sup> See E. Elizabeth Johnson, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 40.

**free, there is no longer male and female; but the family of faith is one in Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup>**

We don't know the end of the story, although the inclusion of Paul's letter in the scriptural canon suggests that it turned out well. In any case, Paul's message to Philemon still rings true. The community of faith spans the ages and the nations, joining us to Paul and Philemon and Onesimus and all those for whom Jesus is Lord. And this bond means that **we are not defined primarily by our lineage or our station in life, but by our place in the family of Christ. To be his kindred is a singular privilege and calling. God entrusts us into each other's care regardless of our origins or our differences, and we turn toward each other with sacrificial love. In other words, this is the family that we choose.**

Or, maybe it's more accurate to say that **this is the family that chooses us. By Christ's welcome, we all find a place of unrestricted belonging here, we share a common story and a family meal every Sunday, and we bear each other's burdens as if they are ours. That is to say, this is where we expect to see the gospel in practice. We are not held together by doctrinal consensus or perfect piety, but only by the grace of a beloved Brother who calls us beloved siblings. Regardless of the family we're given, Christ chooses us for his family, and by his lead, we keep an eye out for others who may join us.**

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<sup>2</sup> Galatians 3:28.