

“ Changing the world- one person at a time”

A sermon on Paul’s letter to Philemon

I begin with some strong and personal words.

I am so ready for deep seated societal change my friends – so ready.

I am so ready for deep seating effective measures to bring down global warming. Soo ready for a biting tax on obscene wealth and on fossil fuels. Soo ready to call out people who believe in conspiracy theories. Soo ready to demonstrate that living in a “free country” does not mean that you can can insult and assault others who dare to disagree with you. Soo ready for electoral reform in our country. Soo ready for a massive economic reform that focusses on local production. And I know that I am not alone. We can adjust to Covid, we must get ready to demand uncomfortable changes which will be our only life saver from climate catastrophe.

But why are not enough people ready? It leads to ask me...

What changes people’s behaviour? Today media have huge influence over what people value and “consume”. Also whoever is at the helm of politics in a country and is given the power to make and change laws has a huge influence on the general mood and outlook of people in the country.

The result of elections is also the product of society’s mood to a certain degree but elections are not always fair, and even in Canada we have a system that allows people whom the majority of citizens did not elect to form a government.

Now, while these words will be surprising to some to come out of the pen or mouth of a minister of Christ, I know that many in our community feel the same level of urgency. I feel even a certain responsibility to voice this collective frustration.

If things are so far better in Canada than south of the border it is because of our mentality here and because of who is in government now. But elections will be coming again, and no one should feel smug. If we want to keep Canada pluralistic, tolerant and if we want it to be a place where our

grandchildren can breathe good air, enjoy a healthy natural environment and live with basic economic needs met- we have work cut out for us.

But what work? How does one change people? How does one change people like the mayor of Amaranth, Ontario who utters Trump language and attitude when he says “ If I have hurt someone its their problem, not mine”. One demands they be removed from office, but on top of that I wish they would still become better people!! How does one change societal trends that so mightily pull into the wrong direction?

I don't have an answer for you, I confess. But I am searching, and I go to our sacred texts.

Let us make a big leap here- : Going back in history to the year 55 AD. Location: The Mediterranean. What is today Greece, Italy, Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Israel. Let me take you to Paul's letter to a man named Philemon, with polite greetings to his wife Apphia and to their son and the church they are lading figures of. We leap into a society under Roman rule. Were those Cesars democratically elected? Of course not. Were they ruling over a society with a huge divide between rich and poor? Absolutely. Did they tolerate dissent? Of course not. Were the leaders interested in keeping the poor poor and in shoring up their wealth? You bet. Were the Roman leaders attractive to the population? Many were. Give them “panem et circenses” -basic food and entertainment, said the roman poet Juvenal -and the common people will be behind the leader. Was this a kind society, and fair? Absolutely not.

The letter, called “Philemon”, takes us right into ordinary daily life under the Roman Empire. Our author (Paul) is in prison or house arrest- because he was disturbing the peace (however that had been defined by those in power). Its also daily life where slavery is not only accepted but *the* engine of the economy. Historians estimate that up to 40% of the general population in antiquity were living in slavery.

There was debt slavery, there were prisoners of war who were then used as slaves to perform harsh labour, and there were the house slaves of the wealthier class who performed all the tasks our dishwashers, washers and dryers, cleaning and service industry personnel do today- and then some- female slaves were often rented out as prostitutes , male slaves also, but if they were lucky they could become esteemed members of the household,

teachers of the kids, managers of property. Philemon, leader in the church in Colossae, had slaves.

Our bible text today offers us an opportunity to see : What was Paul's contribution towards a better world? i. e. the abolition of slavery? And: Does the way he talks to an influential person of his time over a contentious issue give us a Christian perspective for dealing with divisive issues today?

What is the situation? We reconstruct: Onesimus belonged to Philemon's wealthy Christian family (in whose house the church in Colossae regularly met). The man must have heard the Christian message " For freedom Christ has set us free" ;"There is no more male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free, for we are all one in Christ Jesus", (*Galatians, Chapter 3*) and similar testimonies about the New Life in Christ. He heard: All have value, all are loved. He would have heard this while serving in the household of his Christian owner. Perhaps he heard it from Paul himself, when Paul was visiting Colossae. Some conflict between master and slave ensued, the result is that Onesimus (whose name means "the useful One") escapes and seeks refuge with Paul. He is now at risk from being tracked down by the Roman police (a special department had been set up to track down escaped slaves and the owner had free will to come up with any punishment they wished, as slaves were considered property, not people with rights.)The man may or may not have taken something from Philemon's household (there is a reference in verse 18 where Paul says that Paul will reimburse anything that Onesimus may owe Philemon).

Onesimus, in other words, took Paul's preaching literally. How could there continue to be masters and slaves if in Christ all are One?

So, do we think Paul's answer is worthy of an apostle of Jesus Christ?

To be frank: If you are looking for an anti slavery manifesto you won't find it. You won't find it anywhere in the bible, if you are looking for such a statement. The economy of Slavery was as entrenched in antiquity as oil and gas and capitalist market economy are in our age.

What Paul says in his letter to the Galatians about freedom and being One in Christ is the closest it comes to a manifesto.

Paul is in a difficult situation: he himself is already under some form of arrest. He can not travel, and he is being watched by authorities.

Where does he have influence? Where is his power? Realistically its with the Christian communities he founded, and only there. (What is wonderful is of course how Paul's writings did centuries later influence Christians all over the western world and provided fodder for the abolitionist argument)

So how is he inspired to respond to this delicate situation? Without cutting ties with the leader of the church who clearly is not happy with Onesimus' escape? So let me point out what is in it for us, who wonder how to relate to someone who is close to us but does something that is offensive? First of all he takes time. He writes a long letter, which was the only means of communication he had. We might choose a visit over coffee (when that is allowed again).

The letter is a masterpiece of diplomacy. He is clear about what he expects from Philemon, he is clear that traditional Master slave relations are not appropriate for people who are Christians (Onesimus had become a confirmed Christian while with Paul). He is clear that under no circumstances would it be appropriate to proceed with Onesimus as masters dealt with run away slaves. He is clear that he, as founder of the church and apostle has the moral right to tell Philemon what to do---and yet, very smartly the letter comes across as a letter of complete trust and confidence in Philemon. As Christian Philemon will do what is right out of his own accord. In other words "I know that I can trust you to do the right thing", (which will be to receive Onesimus back home in a Spirit of forgiveness kindness as a fellow brother in Christ).

His leadership is effective because it is precise and kind. *Katie Hurley* (*Source: "Enlightened consciousness"*) writes : "People do not change their behaviour when other people yell at them, shame them or send them away to be alone. People change their behaviour when they feel heard, understood and loved. Growth and change require connection and compassion".

This letter is a model of how one might, even from a weak "shut in "position, approach a person one has a relationship with and ask them to consider changed behaviour.

Many questions remain unanswered: Did Philemon do the right thing? (It is likely, because if he had crumpled up the letter in anger and thrown it into the fireplace the church would not have preserved it and we would not have it!)

Did he set Onesimus free? We don't know.

The painful realization dawns that the structural sin of slavery was something the church remained unwilling to take on as a whole, for a very very long time.

We do know that church leaders encouraged “masters to be kind to their slaves and slaves to obey their masters” (Ephesians 6:5 and Colossians 3:22 – these letters were not written by Paul but in his name) even in Colossae, the church of Philemon and Onesimus– the status quo remained.

They were wrong, but we should not judge too quickly. Look at how difficult it is for us to live without consuming oil and gas- what makes us judge the Christian households of antiquity for not systematically freeing their slaves?

And yet- with the Christian message something fundamental **had** shifted. Something had been brought into the world by the Holy Spirit that could never be taken away:

Onesimus. He has a name. He is a person now. He is an individual. He is no longer a chattel, to be dealt with under roman property law. Paul speaks to Philemon about his slave as an individual, with feelings, faults and talents. This is revolutionary.

Onesimus. A name that now has real meaning, someone who is now family,”dear to me”, “my child”, “brother”... Christian groups and individuals who did set slaves free throughout the centuries showed the way. They were a minority, but they influenced the world. They shaped the world we have now, which is , despite all its horrifying problems also the world where thousands take to the streets to demand equality and justice for all people.

Beginning with Jesus' regard for the lowest and despised folks, beginning with His eye that saw the individual Human child, or man or woman in their need and their dignity- something revolutionary had indeed started. You may be slave or free, woman or man, (today we would say gay or straight, black or brown or white) - You are a person first and you matter.

Then Paul developed the theology of equality of all “in Christ – and you have not the practice of abolition- but the Christian foundation for abolition.

How does this help me (and you!) in our frustration with the brutal ways of the world today? -

Think about it for a moment....take your time.....

For me Paul's letter points me to look at where I might have power and influence for change. Paul had influence with Philemon and he knew it and made the best of it. Future generations then used his words to make more structural changes.

Our concern today is that we are running out of time to bring the greatest threats to the planet under control. We are the generation that must get off fossil fuels, there is no time for later. And structural racism has existed for so long, we can't wait for future generations. This can all be quite overwhelming. But despair helps no one, including ourselves.

Paul had one person in front of him. Onesimus there. One slave who wanted to be free. One situation. One slave owner who was mad. One problem to solve. One great letter written. One commitment made. This was something he could handle.

May that be our inspiration for today. We change the world- one decision at a time. I pray that it may become clear to me where my best influence is .

I pray that the same will happen to you who may also feel unheard in this age.

In closing, I invite you to pray with me:

“Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other. “

(written by German-American Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in 1932-33 (the year A. Hitler was elected to power!) and later transformed into “the serenity prayer”.)

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Elisabeth Bachem-Jennings, minister at St. George and St. Andrew United Church in Nova Scotia